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THROSTLETHWAITE.

BY

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AUTHOR OF "AILEEN FERRERS."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THROSTLETHWAITE.

CHAPTER I.

"THERE is your letter, Agatha," said Colonel Kennedy one morning early in the following week, entering the drawing-room, where his wife happened at the moment to be alone.

"A pleasant, tempting plan, is it not?" said Agatha, as she took back the letter.

"More tempting than feasible," was her husband's reply. "It is quite out of the question."

The letter was from Sir Everard Kennedy to Agatha. He had lately taken a house in

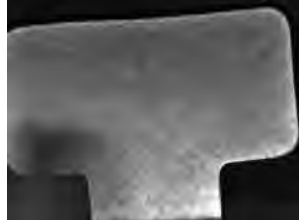
London, and now wrote to ask if she and Nigel would not come up to him for a few weeks, and then join him in a trip abroad. He was ordered to Homburg, for a course of the waters there, and thought of going on to the Engadine afterwards. He proposed that his nephew and niece should be his guests in London for five or six weeks from the beginning of June, and that afterwards they should all go abroad together. He was aware that the children might be a difficulty, but hoped that Agatha would be able to leave them for the summer with her mother.

Agatha liked the idea of the variety and amusement, and before she passed on the letter to her husband had fully made up her mind to go. She would not have left her children on any account, except in her mother's care, but they could stay at Monks-holme perfectly well. She knew that Colonel Kennedy would not hear of her asking such

a favour, and would decidedly assume that going was impossible ; but she had arranged her plans in her own mind quite to her satisfaction, and had no doubt of carrying her point in the end.

“I was afraid you might think so,” she said quietly. “Not that papa and mamma would not be delighted to have the children for any length of time.”

“I don’t doubt that they would have them, if you asked it,” replied Colonel Kennedy. “But I don’t choose to ask any one to be plagued with all our children and their nurses for two or three months, while we are away amusing ourselves. You would not be satisfied, any more than I should, to leave them in lodgings with only the servants ; and, indeed, if we did send them to the sea anywhere in that way, this foreign expedition would be more expensive than would be wise, when we don’t know how many months



THROSTLETHWAITE.

"But, my dear, why cannot you go?" said Mrs. Charteris, before her son-in-law could speak. "Surely you could trust the children to me? Where could they be better than here? And if you leave them here it will not cost you more to go abroad than it would do if you all went to the sea."

"No," replied Agatha; "but Nigel thought——*He* settles the plans, so you must ask him about it!"

"Was it any scruple about leaving the children here, Nigel?" asked Mrs. Charteris at once. "Because, if it was, there was never anything more absurd! They will be only a pleasure; and even if they *were* a charge, I should think nothing of it, if you will kindly take Ruth abroad with you! Nothing could be so invaluable a service to us, just at this moment. It would be the greatest relief, for all this is terribly awkward for her, and bad for her health and

spirits. She has never been abroad at all, and would enjoy it extremely, of course ; and I am quite sure that Mr. Charteris will consent at once to her going, if you will take her. It will be the greatest kindness."

Colonel Kennedy could give no possible reason for refusing to do what everyone seemed to wish, and what was also pleasant to himself. He could only thank Mrs. Charteris for her hospitality to his children, and assure her that he should thoroughly enjoy taking charge of Ruth. He could also put aside any scruples as to their taking her with them to his uncle's, who he said always wished to give Agatha every possible pleasure, and liked nothing so well as having young people to take about with him.

Mrs. Charteris went away to speak to her husband about it at once, in order that Agatha might answer Sir Everard's letter

by return of post, as she said she ought to do.

Colonel Kennedy was following her from the room, when Agatha called him back, and coming up to him said, with a mischievous smile,—

“Now, Nigel, thank me for managing that delicate business so successfully!”

He could not help laughing at her, though he tried to say, reprovingly,—

“You know, Agatha, I always dislike to see you lower yourself by petty manœuvring, and when I told you that I did not wish to have any such favour asked, I meant it.”

Agatha raised her hands and eyes in burlesque despair.

“Was there ever such unreasonable ingratitude? I know you told me not to ask a favour, and a most unnecessary injunction it was, for it is a thing I never do by any chance! It is much the best policy to *confer*

them, and generally it only depends on putting the same thing in a different way. We are going abroad with Sir Everard, because he will like it so much better if we do, that we *even* make up our minds to leave our children! We are going, also, because it will be so good for Ruth, and such a relief to mamma—and virtue, as we all know, is its own reward!”

“Nevertheless, Agatha, I like straight roads best,” replied her husband.

Agatha laughed.

“But there *wasn't* a straight road in this case, you see! You said I was not to ask, and as I always do as I am bid, I didn't ask. Mamma offered it all, you must admit; and, after all, you know you like the plan much better than going to the sea, as we should otherwise have done.”

“I know you are incorrigible!” he answered with a laugh. “And it is of no use to scold

you. Seriously, though, what is the real question about Ruth?"

"That is just the point!" replied Agatha. "There isn't any question at all, or it would not be so troublesome a matter! One thing I have made up my mind about—Ethel shall have no boy friends of that sort;—but as to Ruth—well, of course, no one can doubt that she and Leonard Barrington look upon themselves as engaged to each other, and that is very provoking. Nobody can interfere, because nothing has ever been said about it. Mamma let it go on all last winter, because she hadn't a doubt that he would succeed to Throstlethwaite, and Mrs. L'Estrange is so fond of Ruth that then there would have been no difficulty at all. I don't blame Leonard; of course he expected it, and very reasonably, and it was only common prudence to wait to speak out till the time came. Ruth must have understood that, and cer-

tainly mamma did, but this crotchet of Mrs. L'Estrange's makes it all horribly awkward. It leaves Leonard absolutely at the mercy of her caprices, and if he does not contrive to satisfy her completely, for three whole years, she may very likely never give him the property at all! This being the case, it is out of the question to let anything go on between him and Ruth, and yet there is nothing to stop! It is all such nonsense, too. Leonard is very pleasant and gentlemanly, and quite as fit for the position as most eldest sons, and the only effect of Mrs. L'Estrange's setting up a high standard and insisting on his reaching it will probably be to teach him to deceive her. It is offering a premium on hypocrisy!"

"She probably has good reasons, of which we know nothing," replied Colonel Kennedy, "for she is a sensible woman, and both just and generous. I am sorry for Ruth. Three

years of waiting and doubt will be very trying to her."

"Oh, absurd!" Agatha rejoined. "To wait all that time, and then find nothing come of it, would not do at all. She could never marry Leonard without Throstlethwaite; and that is now such an uncertainty, that we must do all we can to put the idea out of her head at once. If she moons on for three years about Leonard, and then Mrs. L'Estrange throws him over, perhaps without much reason, she is just the sort of girl to think it all the more necessary to stick by him. Here she would see him constantly, and keep it up, but if we take her away and amuse her, there will be some chance of her forgetting him and giving it up entirely. She ought to marry well. Mamma says that Douglas Allonby admires her very much. We are sure to see plenty of him in London. That would really be a better match for her

than Leonard, even with Throstlethwaite, and *Nethercroft* is safely entailed."

"Change and amusement will be good for Ruth, undoubtedly," replied Colonel Kennedy, "and it is as well that she should have more knowledge of the world before being finally pledged to any one. By all means let her see people and judge for herself; but remember, Agatha, I will not have her tormented. I have not seen much of Leonard Barrington, and have no right to judge him, but, with or without Throstlethwaite, I don't fancy he is really good enough for her. Still, it is for her to decide for herself, and she may be trusted to know what is for her own happiness. If Leonard is really the right man for her, she will not give him up because he may happen to be poor."

"No! That is the provoking part of it! She is romantic and wilful, and if he satisfied *her* standard, she would not mind what Mrs.

L'Estrange decided ; so the only thing to be done is to keep her out of his way, and do all we can to get her safely married to some one else in the meantime."

"Give her the chance, by all means, but don't attempt to influence her. Her views of life and yours are widely different, and if you did persuade her into anything against her own judgment, you might make her wretched, for she is not gifted with the power of taking things easily."

"Such a pity! Is it not?" said his wife. "But I never went in for views of life, Nigel, so you need not be afraid. Women with views are always a nuisance, and do quantities of mischief by trying to put the world to rights. If Mrs. L'Estrange had only been content to take things as they came and just make the best of them, like an ordinary mortal, what a blessing it would have been! But she *will* try to play the part of Providence,

and, of course, she'll only make a mess of it in the end, as people with high-flown ideas always do."

Colonel Kennedy did not answer. It was of no use to argue with Agatha on such points, and he merely made up his own mind to protect Ruth from the annoyances which might easily arise from the difference between her ways of thinking and feeling and her sister's.

When the plan was made known to Ruth, she entered into it readily and gratefully. She thought it very kind of the Kennedys to wish to have her with them, and very kind of her father to let her go. She was not blind by any means ; she was perfectly aware of her mother's reason for arranging such a long absence from home for her, and resented it ; but in a pleasant form the change would come, though she knew that in some ways her going away would be a great loss both to

Mrs. L'Estrange and Leonard, in others she felt that it would be a gain. Mrs. L'Estrange would be thrown more completely upon Leonard for companionship and sympathy, which would be the greatest advantage to him; and he would be more likely to make an effort to give her his confidence and consult her, when he had no chance of talking things over with Ruth herself.

She was glad to go, for many reasons, on her own account. She felt that the change and amusement would help her to shake off the sense of disappointment and anxiety by which she could not help feeling herself rather overpowered, while so long an absence would naturally make it easier to meet Leonard again on the same footing as formerly, and would remove the painful consciousness of having a secret understanding with him. If she had remained at home, he would have constantly tried to make opportunities for

showing her anything he might write, and for discussing his plans with her in a tone which she could not check without quarrelling with him, for she knew that he would not bear it, and which yet she felt herself to blame for encouraging.

During the fortnight which passed before she left home, she scarcely saw him. On the first Sunday, the day after her own return from Throstlethwaite, he had been entirely occupied in helping Mrs. L'Estrange to entertain Mr. Wodehouse, and had been unable to come to Monksholme, though he had managed to give her a packet of manuscripts when they all met after church. He had contrived to enclose it with a note in a parcel of books, knowing that this would excite no remark, and remembering the success of the same device once before. He asked her to return the papers to him by the post to Edenford, *with comments*, thus securing, as

he thought, the beginning of a regular correspondence. Ruth returned the papers as she was desired, and said all she had to say ; but she had a strong sense of honour—she intimated firmly enough that she would not do it again, and Leonard knew that it would be useless to try to persuade her. He was fully occupied too in other ways, for the inspection of Mr. Wodehouse had ended in nothing. Mrs. L'Estrange considered him too young and inexperienced, too much the mere fashionable young man wanting something to do, while he took fright at her serious view of his duties.

The question of Kester's Hill settled the matter, and Mr. Wodehouse disappeared. Mrs. L'Estrange gave Leonard a good deal of writing and other work to do for her, which for the present filled his leisure hours to the exclusion of ambitious attempts at literature ; but these were only postponed until the dis-

covery of a suitable agent should set him free again.

Ruth had only one talk with him before she left home. She went with Colonel Kennedy on the last Sunday afternoon to Throstlethwaite, to say good-bye to Mrs. L'Estrange, and found Leonard there. She took the opportunity to urge him to tell his schemes to his aunt, and to let her help and advise him. Her opinion would be valuable, and the confidence would give her pleasure.

"I'll try to have courage," Leonard said. "I know you are right; but she is rather formidable, you must admit. I may get very admirable criticism if I screw up my nerves to ask for it, but it won't be at all inspiring, as yours is."

"It will be much more really useful to you," answered Ruth, trying to speak indifferently.

She had walked over to Throstlethwaite

with her brother-in-law by the fields, and Mrs. L'Estrange and Leonard were walking a little way back with them.

Leonard stopped to fasten a gate, and was long enough about it to allow his aunt and Colonel Kennedy to increase the distance between them and himself and Ruth. Then he said, quickly,—

“Ruth, my evil forebodings from Agatha's return are coming true! I told you I dreaded her influence against me and in favour of——”

“Oh, don't!” exclaimed Ruth; and her voice showed that she was hurt.

“How can I help it?” persisted Leonard. “She is carrying you off to London, and you will have Allonby with you for ever, I know; and she will urge upon you that he has everything to offer, and that you are free to accept——”

Mrs. L'Estrange had stopped, intending

to go no further, and a few steps more must bring them within hearing. Ruth spoke quickly,—

“Why *will* you torment yourself and me so needlessly? If you cannot trust me, how are we to bear all these years before us?”

“I do trust you,” he replied quickly, almost in a whisper. “I will try not to think about it—but it is very hard!”

They had joined the others, and no more words were possible. A few minutes were spent in leave-taking, and then, while Mrs. L'Estrange and Leonard turned back towards Throstlethwaite, Ruth and Colonel Kennedy walked on homewards. He saw that she looked white and tired and unhappy.

“She cares more for that fellow than he is worth,” was his silent comment. “I am glad we are taking her out of his reach.”

Ruth was altogether wretchedly uncom-

fortable. She felt that Leonard was unjust and ungenerous in doubting her, and inconsiderate in thus forcing from her acknowledgments which she ought not to give unless he would openly avow the understanding between them and take the consequences. She was, however, more hurt than indignant, for she believed that he really could not help having these foolish, jealous fancies, and taking any means that he could think of to quiet them. She excused him and she pitied him, but she felt that what he had said would haunt her, and must tend greatly to destroy her pleasure.

CHAPTER II.

THE Kennedys and Ruth left Monksholme early in June, and were to be away for at least three months. Ruth had never hitherto been out of England, nor had she ever had any real glimpse of life in London, and her friends not unnaturally hoped that the novelty and excitement might put all sentimental dreams out of her head.

Mr. Charteris, who hated London and hated travelling, always excused himself from ever leaving home (except for short visits to old friends and relatives in their country houses, which he heartily enjoyed) by the

unanswerable argument that he could not afford it. His fortune was handsome, but it was not more than sufficient to keep up Monksholme as he chose that it should be kept up, and to meet the inevitably heavy expenses of educating his five sons and starting them in the world. Ruth could not, however, be said to have suffered from any want of society; for her parents were sociable and hospitable, and took their part fully in all county gaieties; but her knowledge of the world had hitherto been gained exclusively from having guests to entertain at home, and being entertained in their houses in return, and thus there had been little variety in her experience of life.

She knew London only from occasional visits of a week or two at a time to friends or relatives, from which she had invariably carried away an impression of confusion and fatigue quite overpowering enjoyment. Ex-

hibitions, concerts, plays and operas, were amusing, no doubt, but too many in one week were bewildering ; and what she had seen of society seemed to her simply intolerable. She would have liked to meet (even if it had been merely to see them) really distinguished people, with names which she knew and revered ; but none such came in her way, for the friends with whom she stayed were all in the same sphere of well-born, affluent, semi-fashionable mediocrity, and the few parties at which she had accidentally been present had appeared to her in no way enjoyable.

Accustomed to the country house form of society, where rooms were large and numbers few, she thought the crowd and noise and glare intolerable, and wondered how any one could find pleasure under such circumstances. To stand for an hour in a room so full that breathing and moving were almost

equally impossible, and in the midst of such a Babel of sound that she must speak at the highest pitch of her voice if she hoped to be heard, even by the person nearest to her, was simply a penance; for even when she met people whom she had known and liked in the country, they seemed to her to have lost all their pleasantness in the fuss of their London engagements.

This year, however, she fully expected to enjoy herself much more, for six weeks must allow of more leisure for comfortable, rational sight-seeing, and it was impossible to imagine either Agatha or Colonel Kennedy encouraging a perpetual state of rush and whirl, whether of business or pleasure.

Both in their different ways were so kind and pleasant that Ruth could not doubt that she should be happy with them, and she was not disappointed. Her expectations of pleasure were founded chiefly on the prospect

of Germany and Switzerland later in the summer, but she discovered to her surprise that it might be possible to enjoy London very much, even in the height of the season, for in Sir Everard Kennedy's house she was in a different atmosphere from any in which she had ever been before.

He was a remarkable man, who had spent a long life in hard work, and of late years had held high official positions, and he numbered among his friends and acquaintances many people really worth knowing. He was now in rather bad health and could not go much into society, but as soon as he once more had Agatha to arrange it all for him, he liked to receive his friends at his own house two or three times a week. These parties were a totally new experience to Ruth, while even the ordinary routine of receptions and balls, through which she went with Agatha, ceased to be wearisome as she

knew more people, and those of a more interesting kind.

There was a life and movement, an eagerness of interest in questions of real importance, and a variety in the views of those questions, which amused and excited her in this, her first glimpse of political and professional life at its centre; and she was not as speedily disenchanted as she might have been, for she heard little of the small personalities which play so large a part in even the real work of the world, because neither Sir Everard nor Colonel Kennedy ever encouraged gossip of any kind, while Agatha's laughing sketches of people and things were so obviously caricatures as to make little impression upon her.

Ruth was happy and bright, but while Agatha hoped and believed that amusement and admiration were duly doing their work, and driving away all sentimental dreams of

patient constancy, and that keen interest in the active life of the world was rapidly preparing her mind to accept a position which would give her as near an approach to a share in it as was open to a woman, she was really looking forward to the time when public life would be the natural sphere for Leonard, and anticipating her own pleasure in sympathizing with all his interests.

Her happiness was all the more complete, because she gathered from Mrs. L'Estrange's frequent letters that all was going well, and that she and Leonard were working harmoniously together. Her affection for him and her trust in him so completely filled her heart that she almost forgot his warning about Agatha's intention of using all her influence in favour of Mr. Allonby, and in truth did not think that his frequent visits were on her account, for he talked chiefly to her sister.

Agatha had tact enough to know that Ruth must not be hurried or startled ; she managed matters with her usual dexterity, and at some sacrifice on her own part, for though she cordially desired that Mr. Allonby should marry her sister, she personally thought him exceedingly tedious.

The Allonbys of Nethercroft were almost the most important people in the county, and this man was the eldest son. It would be, as to position and fortune, a brilliant match for Ruth, and Mr. Allonby himself was unexceptionable. He was one of the members for the county, and was rising into public notice as a useful, painstaking man ; he was tolerably clever, very well informed, perfectly conscientious, and capable of doing much really good work ; but he had not a spark of originality or enthusiasm about him, and Ruth, who had known him all her life, more

or less intimately, thought him narrow-minded and dull.

His friends wished him to marry, and he had deliberately decided upon marrying Ruth Charteris, partly perhaps because she was so perfectly free from any wish that he should do so. She satisfied his taste and his judgment in every possible way, and by this time he was really as much in love with her as he ever could be with anyone, but his manner was stiff and formal, and conveyed no impression to her mind of any special feeling for herself.

She liked him and respected him and tried not to show that he wearied her, but sometimes she wondered that Agatha, who was generally rather intolerant of being bored, should encourage him to come so much; by this time, however, she understood Agatha's social tactics pretty well, and she concluded the reason to be that he was par-

ticularly useful in getting tickets for things for which tickets were difficult to obtain and proportionately desirable to have, while as an old family friend he was a perfectly admissible escort on occasions when Colonel Kennedy either could not or would not be with them.

Seven weeks passed quickly, and then they all left England, and Ruth exchanged one form of enjoyment for another. To her, who had never travelled at all, even the hackneyed route from London to Frankfort was full of novelty ; and when they were settled in comfortable apartments at Homburg, where they were to remain for three or four weeks, she was prepared to find the watering-place life quite amusing enough to enable her to wait without impatience till they should go on to Switzerland.

They were a cheerful party in themselves, and they had already found some friends

among the crowd, who filled the little town, while they knew of many more who were likely to come. Colonel Kennedy was perhaps the only one of the party who required to resign himself to his fate, for a German watering-place had not many attractions for an active Englishman in perfect health and without any inclination either to gamble, gossip or flirt; but having come there to please his uncle and his wife, it did not occur to him to grumble.

He was willing to take such amusement as was to be had, and he had supplied himself with plenty of work, for he was not a man who could ever be idle. Knowing that it might be some months before he was again employed professionally, he had set to work, even while at Monksholme, on an elaborate study of all the military systems of Europe, past and present, which might or might not bear fruit in some work of his own upon

them, according as leisure and inclination served, but which was interesting to him for the time, and which must be of use to him in one way or another.

It was this which had made Agatha say that Ruth was as good as a secretary to him, for she herself had gladly made over to her sister the task or the privilege, whichever it might be considered, of helping him, both by a more perfect knowledge of modern languages than he possessed and in making extracts. Ruth had translated and copied with ready good nature and genuine interest, and though all such occupation had necessarily ceased for her in the midst of London engagements, she was quite prepared to begin again now, and to be interested in what he had done in the interval, for he had spent a good deal of time at the British Museum collecting fresh materials.

She enjoyed being allowed to share in the

work, and only marvelled that Agatha should so completely give it up to her. At Monks-holme she had supposed that Agatha wished to be free to spend as much time as possible with her mother, and also she then had her children to attend to, which took up more or less of her time; but that was all different now, and when her brother-in-law asked her on the first morning after their arrival at Homburg if she was prepared to be made useful again, though she assented cordially at the moment, she felt it almost necessary to say afterwards to her sister,

“I suppose as I did it for him at home when you were busy, Nigel thought he must ask me to go on, but are you sure he wouldn't rather have you to help him now?”

Agatha laughed.

“Me? Oh! that is quite out of my line, and I should do no good—only worry him

and bore myself to death ! Of course, if you were not there I should have to do it now and then, but I am thankful to escape. Are you sure you don't dislike it too ? If you do, and don't want to be troubled, I'll get you off in a minute, by saying it is too much for you !"

" I like it extremely !" Ruth answered at once. " It is so good of him to let me help him—only I thought——"

" You are fearfully romantic, Ruth, really !" exclaimed Agatha with her gay laugh. " My dear child, being Nigel's wife doesn't change my nature, or make me care a bit about all the heavy, prosy things men of that kind fuss about ! It is a great pleasure to him though, no doubt, to have you really interested in it all, and it will help to keep him quiet while we are here—if you really don't mind."

Ruth only repeated the assurance that she

enjoyed it, and allowed the subject to drop. The problem of married life, as exemplified by her sister and her brother-in-law, was beginning to occupy her mind a good deal, and puzzled her seriously.

It was beyond her comprehension that a woman with all Agatha's natural brightness and intelligence should so coolly put aside all idea of trying to share in her husband's interests, and should be content to receive from him merely a sort of affectionate admiration, leaving him to find from others sympathy for all that was best and highest in both heart and mind, if he cared to find it at all. They were to all appearance perfectly happy together, and yet they lived their lives on a totally different level, without, so far as she could see, any attempt on one side to rise, or on the other to raise.

Ruth could not help being provoked with Agatha's gay indifference to what seemed to

her the humiliating position of knowing her husband only on the surface ; and she was rather inclined to blame Colonel Kennedy for not having contrived to improve his wife more in the six years which they had spent together ! She speculated and criticised in her own mind with all the severity of inexperience, even while heartily loving them both ; forgetting that it was scarcely reasonable to blame Agatha for not feeling her exclusion from heights and depths which she was utterly incapable of appreciating, and that Colonel Kennedy might perhaps show the truest wisdom in making the best of his wife as she was, instead of tacitly admitting, by ineffectual attempts to alter all her ways of thinking and feeling, that he was conscious of having made a mistake.

He had fallen in love, at an age when he might have known better, with her beauty, her graceful manners and lively spirits, and,

though a very few months of life together proved to him that she had neither the wish nor the power to be really a companion, he was wise and just enough not to hold her responsible for his own folly in marrying her, and to content himself with her as she was, thankful to her for being at any rate affectionate, pure-hearted and womanly, though in a somewhat shallow fashion, failing in none of the duties of wife or mother as they presented themselves to her mind, even though her view of them might not be the highest. He was proud, too, of the beauty and grace and tact which made her so successful in society, and he was idly amused by her un-failing vivacity.

Sometimes he might regret her total want of interest in his pursuits, and sometimes he was mortified and annoyed by her commonplace, low-toned views of life, but on the whole he was very fond of her; and (though

Ruth in her young romance would have thought it a happiness rather to be despised) their life together was a very happy one, and one which neither of them would have wished to change, even if they could.

When Agatha disclaimed all wish to deprive Ruth of her office as Colonel Kennedy's secretary, the two sisters were together in the balcony of their apartment in the Kisseleff Strasse, and as Sir Everard, returning from a visit to his banker, stopped under the window to ask some question about plans for the afternoon's amusement, he felt reasonably proud of the appearance of the two ladies for whom he considered himself responsible.

Agatha's pretty figure, delicate, regular features and lovely complexion, with her blue eyes and masses of glossy fair hair, gave her claims to admiration which never failed to be acknowledged, especially as voice,

and smile and manner always enhanced the attraction.

Sir Everard was one of her most devoted adherents; and with good reason, for she had studied his comfort and his taste in every possible way, and had made his house all that he wished it to be; but even he, as he now looked up at the two sisters, perceived that though there might be more diversity of opinion as to Ruth's actual beauty, there was something in her face which was wanting in Agatha's. Ruth was the taller of the two, but Agatha was certain to be noticed more quickly, for her sister's colouring was not nearly so striking. Ruth's features were quite as good, but her eyes were grey and her hair dark, while her complexion was much less brilliant. Sir Everard decidedly thought that though he himself admired Agatha the most, Ruth was undeniably a handsome, attractive-looking girl; and he

could imagine that people who did really admire her might think that there was no comparison possible between her beauty and her sister's, for it was certainly of a higher type.

He had heard from Agatha enough of the story of Leonard Barrington and Throstlethwaite to excite his interest, and to account for Ruth's occasional fits of silence and abstraction ; while he knew from the same source that Mr. Allonby had spoken to Agatha of his hopes and wishes before they left London, and had announced an intention of following them as soon as his public duties allowed him to do so. His worldly wisdom had led him to sympathize with Agatha's view of the question, and to hope that he might come and succeed ; but at this moment, as he looked up at Ruth, he could not help thinking that if she did marry Douglas Allonby, he should be really sorry for it.

"A girl with her face never *could* love that machine of a man," he said to himself; "and she is too good to be wasted on him just because he is a great match. She may do it, perhaps—if she can't marry as she wishes she may fall back on ambition—one never knows."

At any rate, the progress of the affair would supply a little excitement to enliven the monotonous dullness of watering-place life.

CHAPTER III.

SIR EVERARD had all the punctuality of an old soldier, and every morning, exactly at seven, he was ready to go down to the wells and begin his prescribed course of water-drinking and walking. He liked a companion, and as Ruth was naturally an early riser it had very soon become an understood thing that she should be the one to accompany him. The whole thing was so new to her that she really enjoyed it, and they soon knew so many people that the two hours to be spent before breakfast in walking or sitting in the gardens passed very pleasantly.

Colonel Kennedy seldom appeared at all. He much preferred going off alone into the woods and was grateful to Ruth for enabling him to do so by keeping his uncle company, for he considered walking up and down in the midst of a gossiping mob an unattractive process at any time, and even more so than usual in the early morning.

Agatha found it tiring to come for more than a short time, and therefore rarely joined them until after eight, having quickly discovered that it was socially much pleasanter after that hour.

One morning, about a week after their arrival, Ruth was standing at the book-stall near the Kaiser-Brunnen, amusing herself by looking over the books, while she waited till Sir Everard should finish an apparently interminable chat with another old general; she felt a touch on her shoulder, and looking round found that it came from the parasol of

a lady in a chair, which had been drawn up very near her. She was evidently an invalid, sweet and delicate and refined-looking, with perfectly white hair, and a face which bore such legible traces of sickness and sorrow, that Ruth thought it possible she might not be really so old as she appeared to be.

"I beg your pardon," she said, in a voice as sweet and refined as her face, "but is not this yours? We thought we saw you drop it as we followed you along the avenue."

She showed a little gold solitaire as she spoke—a dog's head most exquisitely executed.

Ruth took it eagerly.

"Thank you so much! Yes, it is mine, and I should have been so sorry to lose it, for the set would have been spoiled; and I could never have replaced it, as it was given to me on my last birthday by——"

While she was speaking, she exhibited its

fellow on one wrist, and fastened it into the other cuff, from which it had dropped ; but as she came to the end of her sentence she stopped short. The set of solitaires had been Frank L'Estrange's last gift to her, and the thought of him always saddened her.

"As you have found a friend, Ruth, I will go for a turn with General Grantley," said Sir Everard, as he passed her. "I shall not be long."

He was gone before she could answer, and she turned in some embarrassment to repeat her thanks to the lady in the chair, thinking that she would then find a seat, and wait till Sir Everard should return, or some one whom she could join should happen to pass. Before she could speak, however, she met so pleasant a smile of comprehension and amusement from the invalid that she could not help laughing.

"Your father did not know I was a

stranger when he proposed to leave you in my charge ; but may not I profit by his mistake ? I am to wait here till my son comes back to me, and if my chair is drawn to that vacant bench, will you not take compassion on my solitude ? I know no one in all this moving crowd."

Ruth smiled.

The lady's manner was winning and her face interesting, and she was rather glad of an excuse for seeing more of her.

"He is not my father," she replied, "and, of course, he thought that I knew you, or he would not have imposed me on you so coolly. You are very kind, and I shall be glad to sit with you till he comes back."

They established themselves comfortably in the shade, and proceeded to make acquaintance.

"I don't think I have seen you here before this morning ?" said Ruth. "One soon

knows people by sight, and there are only a few who come down in chairs."

"We only arrived yesterday," was the reply. "We have been at Wildbad for a month—all for me—and now I am to be here for some time. I had a rheumatic fever early in the spring, and I have not yet quite recovered from it, but Wildbad has nearly cured me, and all I am supposed to want now is strength. My son brought me down here, and is now gone to move our belongings from the hotel into lodgings. As I cannot be of any use I am better quite out of the way."

There was a slight touch of pain in the tone in which those last words were spoken, and Ruth wondered what it meant, as she answered—

"It is probably a pleasant novelty to him to be allowed to do your work as well as his own, while you are still an invalid."

"Not much of a novelty, I am afraid!" was the reply, with a sigh. Then, with the natural well-bred instinct of not inflicting personal matters upon a stranger, she began to ask questions about the place and the people, which Ruth answered brightly; and so they gradually fell into pleasant talk, and it was with some regret on both sides that they saw Sir Everard returning along the avenue with Agatha, who had joined him in the interval. They paused when a few yards off, to speak to some acquaintance, and Ruth rose to go to them.

"My friends have come back for me," she said, with a smile, "and I must join them. Thank you for letting me stay with you; and thanks, too, once more, for my solitaire."

"I must share those with my son," was the reply, "for though I saw it on the path, he picked it up, and left it with me to give to

you, for it was he who was so certain that it was yours."

"I am very grateful to him for having such quick eyes," said Ruth. "I should have been very sorry to lose it. Everybody here is always doing the same thing and haunting the same places, so we are sure to meet often, and I hope you will let me come and sit by your chair sometimes, and tell you the news, for my people know everybody, and we hear it all, both true and false."

The invalid was returning a cordial answer, and each was resolving to try, meanwhile, to find out the other's name, when a quick step near them made both look round, and Ruth, to her extreme surprise, found herself face to face with the gentleman whom she so well remembered rowing across Brideswater on that spring afternoon from which all the troubles of her life seemed to date. Of the two, however, perhaps the lady in the chair

was the most astonished, when she saw the recognition between her son and this charming stranger. There was a momentary hesitation and embarrassment on both sides; then as he came forward raising his hat, but apparently uncertain whether to speak or not, Ruth held out her hand cordially, and said with a blush and a laugh—

“I must thank you for finding this for me,” touching her wrist as she spoke.

“I knew it was yours,” he replied. “You wore them that day—and I remembered them perfectly.”

“You had a good view of them when I was rowing!” she answered, smiling. “I hope, after all, you caught your train and suffered no inconvenience in consequence of your timely help to my wilful little Quiz.”

“Thanks to you, I was in ample time,” he said. “I hope——” But his hopes were destined to be silenced; for Ruth, seeing

Agatha rather impatiently beckoning to her, said quickly—

“I beg your pardon, but my sister is calling me—I must go.”

Then turning to his mother, she added—

“I shall hope to meet you again.”

And the next moment she was absorbed into a group of the most fashionable people then in the place, who were arranging an excursion for that day, to the top of the Feldberg.

“You know her?” said the invalid. “Who is she? Where have you met her?”

“She is a Miss Charteris, and I met her by accident this spring, when I was walking through the Lake country, on my way back from Glasgow. Her dog got buried in a hole and I helped her to dig him out, and then, as I was rather short of time to catch a train, she rowed me across the lake to the nearest station.”

“And you recognized her this morning?”

"Yes, of course. She isn't the kind of girl one would not know again. I saw her when we were listening to the band, at the other end."

"Then why did you not take her the stud when you picked it up, instead of leaving it to me?"

"I did not know that she might care to have to acknowledge my acquaintance here, and I had no notion of forcing myself upon her. They're a fashionable set, mother, and quite out of our line. However, it can't be helped now; and, after all, it matters very little. How did she come to be with you?"

His mother explained, adding—

"She is very simple and charming."

"It won't make much difference to us, anyhow," replied her son. "Now, we had better be making our way up to our new quarters. I ordered breakfast before I came down again for you."

Ruth saw them turn up the road leading to the town, but she knew that she must wait for another meeting to find out who they were, for she was hopelessly surrounded. The plan for the day, and the careful arranging of the party who were to join in it, occupied Agatha entirely for the time, and it was not till they were at breakfast that she remembered to ask Ruth who the new people were. Then Ruth explained, laughing, that she had not the least idea, and told the story of her adventure in the spring, and of her unexpected encounter of that morning.

"It will be easy enough to find out who they are," said Agatha; "but really, Ruth, you ought to be rather more careful before you rush into an acquaintance with people at a place of this kind."

"An invalid old lady in a chair cannot be a very dangerous acquaintance, at any rate!"

said Colonel Kennedy. "However, you must point them out on the first opportunity, Ruth, and we will investigate."

The opportunity came sooner than they expected. Before eleven that morning two waggonettes with four horses were standing under the trees at the foot of the Kisseleff Strasse, waiting for the party who were going up the Feldberg to collect. Servants were bustling about with shawls and hampers, and the various ladies and gentlemen were standing round, only waiting the coming of the great lady of the party to settle themselves in the carriages and start.

"There, Nigel!" said Ruth, touching her brother-in-law's arm. "This tall man coming towards us with letters in his hand is the son of my dear old lady. He must pass us to get to the pillar at the corner—let us speak to him, and find out what their name is, and where they are staying; for I am sure they

are nice people, and she knows nobody and is lonely."

Before Colonel Kennedy could answer, the gentleman on his way to the letter-box had reached the group, on the outskirts of which they were standing. He was passing with merely a bow to Ruth; but she knew quite as well as anyone how to carry her point in such matters when she chose, and she spoke,—

"We are going off for a long expedition up the Feldberg, and back by Königstein."

It seemed a natural explanation of all the commotion, and it answered her purpose, for he stopped and said he "was afraid they would find it very hot."

"I daresay we shall," said Ruth, quietly; then, with a very slight blush and a smile, she added, "I should like to introduce you to my brother-in-law—Colonel Kennedy—only——"

And the pause sufficiently conveyed the question she wished to ask.

Colonel Kennedy was amused; for not even Agatha herself could have done it more easily.

The stranger hesitated for a moment and then said, frankly,—

“I remember having the pleasure of meeting Colonel Kennedy, several years ago, at Chelsfield—my name is Stephen Powys.”

Colonel Kennedy responded cordially,—

“I thought I knew your face, but I should not have remembered the name belonging to it. I need scarcely apologize though, for at your age seven years change a man a good deal. I am glad to meet you again.”

The party was now complete, and all were impatient to be off, so that Ruth and Colonel Kennedy were obliged to turn away rather

abruptly, the latter only finding time to say hurriedly,—

“We are sure to meet in the evening.”

Ruth had been silent in extreme astonishment. This sudden discovery of Stephen Powys was puzzling ; but she had no time to think about it, for she was in one of the carriages, with a large and lively party who claimed all her attention, while Colonel Kennedy, the only person to whom she cared to speak on the subject, was on the box of the other. She had to keep her speculations to herself during the whole day, for none of the rest of the party would have been in the least interested about the question of why an insignificant young man, who had been supposed to have gone to America, should now turn up in Homburg, and she had no opportunity for talking to her brother-in-law apart. The day was a successful one. The weather was fine, the view was clear, and the air

delicious ; the party were well assorted, and, even after a merry pic-nic on the top of the mountain and the long drive down, no one seemed sorry that they had previously arranged to dine together at the Kursaal at half-past seven.

They all dispersed to their several lodgings with time only to dress and meet again. As Agatha passed through the little salon to her room, she took up a card lying on the table, which had evidently been left during their absence. After looking at it, she handed it to her sister, with a smile which implied that it concerned her more than any one, and passed on into her room.

Ruth stood there for a moment with Mr. Allonby's card in her hand, while she read the words written in pencil on it,—

“I have just arrived. Your servant tells me that you and the Grantleys and Hazelwoods all dine together at the Kursaal. I

hope I shall not do wrong in arranging to join your party."

There could be no possible reason why Mr. Allonby should not come to Homburg if he chose ; and, having come, there was nothing either cool or unnatural in his thus joining himself to a party all of whom he knew more or less, and several of whom were intimate friends ; but Agatha's smile implied that she, at any rate, assumed that he had come for her sister's sake, and Ruth was, for the moment, very angry indeed.

She suddenly perceived the meaning of all Agatha's quiet encouragement of Mr. Allonby's constant visits in London, and of his being allowed to join them so incessantly wherever they went ; and whether he really meant anything or not, or whether it was only a scheme of her sister's, she deeply resented it. That Agatha, knowing—as Ruth felt sure she must know—that she looked

upon herself as pledged to Leonard, should deliberately seek and persistently encourage another lover, was intolerable. It was worldly and low and unkind—placing her in an awkward and humiliating position, and making her unconsciously appear a party to doing what she considered heartless and degrading.

She tossed the card indignantly on the table, with a strong inclination—which, however, she had the good sense to resist—to profess herself too tired to go to the Kursaal, and so spend the evening alone at home. Second thoughts showed her that she had better not appear to notice that she was supposed to be responsible for Mr. Allonby's arrival, but trust to herself to show quietly and plainly, both to him and Agatha, that she would much have preferred his staying away if he had really come on her account.

No choice, however, was given to her as to the arrangement of the party. It was generally imagined that Mr. Allonby was an almost declared lover of hers, and therefore every one instinctively played into Agatha's hands, so that Ruth was helpless to prevent herself from being placed next to him. When there, she was almost inclined to laugh at herself for fancying him in the least disposed to disturb her peace, for his matter-of-fact conversation and quiet manner were as little lover-like as possible. She found, however, that he would not leave her during the evening. Whether they sat on the terrace to drink coffee and listen to the band, or whether they walked round the gambling-rooms (which were open for the last year) he remained in close attendance upon her. She had no resource but to endure it, for every one seemed determined to leave him

to her; and she could not even take refuge with Colonel Kennedy, for immediately on coming out from dinner, he had met an old friend of his school-boy days, and, deserting the ladies altogether, had gone to smoke and talk with him in the less select crowd in the garden below the terrace.

Ruth saw nothing of Mrs. Powys. She was probably too great an invalid to be out late. Her son was visible once or twice, either looking on at the play or passing along the terrace; but he was each time alone, and never came within possible speaking distance of the conspicuous and fashionable group of which Ruth was an unwilling member.

She could only make up her mind that when she went down to the wells the next morning, she would take very good care to keep out of Mr. Allonby's way, and would also solve the mystery of this sudden appear-

ance of Mr. Powys. Fortunately, each step she could take towards succeeding most effectually in one object, would help her also to success in the other.

CHAPTER IV.

THE office of morning companion to Sir Everard was by this time merely nominal, for he had so many acquaintances that Ruth never felt any hesitation in leaving him if she wished it.

"I see Mrs. Powys over there, in her chair, Sir Everard," she said the next morning, not long after they went out. "I am going to talk to her for a little while."

He merely said—"Very well. You will easily find me somewhere about if you want to join me again," and continued talking to his friends, while Ruth quickly left the colon-

nade and went to join Mrs. Powys, whose chair was placed not far from where the band was playing.

Mrs. Powys smiled, well pleased to see her, and said it was very kind of her to come to amuse her.

Ruth pointed out a few [notabilities, described their excursion of the day before, and then, after a while, said rather shyly,—

“I suppose your son told you how we met once before?—but I had no idea who he was until he told us his name afterwards, and said that he had known my brother-in-law long ago.”

“I think *I* recollect Colonel Kennedy, too,” replied Mrs. Powys. “He was only Captain then, but he used to be at our house near Chelsfield with the other officers. Stephen told me that he remembered him; but we have lived quite out of the world ever since that time.”

"I hope you won't think me too impertinent," Ruth began, "but I want so much to ask you one or two questions. Some friends of mine tried to find out Mr. Powys this spring—they wanted to persuade him to undertake an agency—they were told that he had left his home in Devonshire, and that his address was not known, but that his friends believed him to have gone to America. They therefore reluctantly gave up the search for him, and it was a great disappointment to Frank L'Estrange."

Mrs. Powys looked very much surprised.

"L'Estrange?" she said. "Ah! there was a little boy of that name, who was at school with my poor boy. Was it the same?"

"Yes. He was ill—dying—but his mother wanted an agent for her property, and Frank set his heart on finding out Mr. Powys, having been told that it was the kind of office he would undertake, and remembering him with

enthusiastic admiration. Mrs. L'Estrange sent to London to inquire about him, and that was what she heard."

"But from whom?"

"From a Mr. Hillyer."

"Impossible, my dear Miss Charteris! Mr. Hillyer has always known Stephen's address, and knows quite well that his negotiation about work in America came to nothing. Our home in Devonshire is still our home; but Stephen would be very glad, now, to go elsewhere if he could get anything to do, and I long for it for him more than I can tell you, for I have been such a drag upon him all these years, and have only lately begun to see it. There must have been some strange mistake. I am very sorry if in consequence of it Stephen has lost the chance of anything that would have been good for him. I cannot understand it. Did Mrs. L'Estrange write to Mr. Hillyer himself about it?"

"No. Frank had heard accidentally from some old school-friend that he was sure Mr. Hillyer would know Mr. Powys' address; he was so eager to have him found that he persuaded his mother to send his cousin up to London at once, to inquire personally; and this was the result."

"It is very odd. Perhaps Stephen may be able to explain it. He will be coming to look after me soon, and I hope you will ask him. It is such a pity! Not that he will mind it nearly so much as I do for him, I daresay, or at any rate he won't allow that he does; but if you knew how he has sacrificed his life for me, you would understand my longing to see something of brightness and prosperity come to him. Even though I had no share in bringing it, I should feel it a relief to my conscience."

Ruth scarcely liked to ask any leading questions, although she would have been

glad to hear more about their past life, for Mrs. Powys was so evidently an invalid who was easily excited, that it seemed hardly fair to take advantage of her readiness to speak.

"It is impossible to know whether this agency of Mrs. L'Estrange's would have been at all the sort of thing Mr. Powys would have liked, but if it should be, I do not think it is even now too late for him to inquire about it. At least, she had not appointed anyone when I heard from her a few days ago."

"Then you will tell him about it?" said Mrs. Powys eagerly. "Miss Charteris, if your brother-in-law knew us long ago at Chelsfield, of course you know something of the misfortunes which changed Stephen's life so terribly, but very few people know anything of the special reason I have for so earnestly desiring to see him once more in the way towards occupying some position

worthy of him. I cannot forget that all his troubles have been of my causing."

They were sitting a little way from the crowded paths, and could talk without interruption. Ruth had, at this moment, the satisfaction of seeing Mr. Allonby obliged to content himself with only a recognition from her, and join other friends, and she listened all the more readily to Mrs. Powys, who continued as if it were a relief to her to speak to some one.

"To begin with, he is only my stepson. I married his father when he was quite a child, and he was always very dear to me; but I am not his mother. My own boy was many years younger; he was drowned one summer, in bathing. My husband's health was failing then, and both his judgment and his power of work were far from what they had been. He felt our boy's death nearly as much as I did, and I was anxious about him.

I persuaded him, against Stephen's wishes and advice, to take a brother-in-law of mine into partnership, and to trust a great deal of the management of affairs to him, for Stephen himself was still at College. This man was clever, plausible and dishonest. It is a common story enough, I suppose, and cannot be very interesting to a stranger, but it was a real tragedy to us. He gained my husband's confidence, who left more and more in his power as he himself grew less fit for business, and so the crash came. The shock, and the sense of disgrace killed him, and all the burden was left on Stephen's shoulders—a mere boy of two-and-twenty, who had been brought up as the heir to great wealth."

"And he behaved nobly, we were told," said Ruth, as Mrs. Powys paused. "It was a hard trial for him, no doubt."

"He gave up everything, even the property

which had been settled on his mother, and was indisputably his, in order that all claims might be satisfied. We kept only a small property of mine, a farm on the edge of Dartmoor, which came to me from my grandfather, and which I could not part with, because it was settled upon my sister's children, in case of my leaving none of my own. I think all the sorrows of that year had affected my brain, or I *could* not have been so miserably weak and selfish as I was. I was really ill, and I seemed to have no power to think, except, of myself. I urged Stephen to live with me on this farm, out of reach of the world and of the echo of our misfortunes and disgrace. He went with me there—it was a place I had known and loved as a child—and for my sake, as I found afterwards, he refused several offers of a fresh start in life, which were made to him at once by friends of his father's. My life and reason seemed

to depend on my being allowed to live at this place on which I had set my fancy, and on his being with me, but I knew nothing at the time of all that he gave up for me. I knew only that I had peace and rest and everything that was necessary for my comfort and health. If I did not believe, now, that for the time I had really lost my power of mind (although I was apparently sane enough), the thought of the sacrifice I accepted would be an even more intolerable burden than it is."

"But of course he could not leave you when you were so ill," said Ruth, "and he has plenty of time before him still."

"But he will probably never again have the same opportunities," replied Mrs. Powys. "The help was offered and refused, and people are naturally soon allowed to drop out of notice if they appear to wish it. If he had then accepted either of the three

offers made to him, he would by this time have been in a very different position from what he is now, for he is clever and determined, and works hard. I buried him down there and stopped all chance of a career worthy of him. We were poor, for my little farm, though he managed it admirably, could not bring in more than a hundred a year, and yet I never missed one necessary comfort. He took one good servant with us there, my maid, who had been his nurse and also my boy's, and she has done for us all that I ought to have done. She managed the house and the dairy and the poultry, and waited on me, and I was contented to enjoy the comfort and never even wondered how Stephen found the means to pay for it! He took any kind of work he could get in addition to his own farming. He acted as agent for one or two small properties near us of which the owners were absent, he undertook

to manage some stone quarries not far off, and even with all this wretched slavery he filled up his spare hours in sketching, for he was a first rate amateur artist, and sold drawing after drawing to some dealer he knew, getting absurdly low prices for them, of course; but, as he said afterwards, they cost him nothing, so every pound was clear gain, and no sum was too small to be acceptable. I learned all this gradually as I grew stronger, but have only known it fully within the last year."

"I do not wonder at your wishing for some good fortune for him," said Ruth, whose sympathy was fully enlisted, "but you should not let yourself be too anxious about it. Mr. Powys does not look as if he had been leading an unhappy life!"

"He always makes the best of things," replied Mrs. Powys, "and he is naturally cheerful. But what I think of is, that now,

at nine and twenty, instead of being prosperous and on the way to wealth and distinction, as I am sure he might have been, he is still poor and unknown, without prospects, almost without friends, and dependent upon daily toil of head and hands for everything. If I were to die to-morrow I could not even leave him the little I have, and I ask myself incessantly—are my life and health worth the price at which they have been saved? Since I have been comparatively well, and we have seen something of our relations and of a few old friends, I have learned the truth, and I have urged him to seek any promising opening and either to leave me or to take me with him as might seem best; but so far he has failed to find anything better than what he has; and now this illness of mine, and the expense of coming to these German baths, is using up even the small sum he had managed to save to meet any accidental necessities.

I did not wish him to bring me, for I could not even come without a maid ; but he only laughed and said savings were meant for rainy days, and that a rheumatic fever made a very rainy day indeed ! He cannot stay away any longer himself now, but he is to leave me here and come back for me in a few weeks. I feel that his life has been sacrificed to mine, and all his gifts devoted to the useless task of supporting and nursing me ; and the thought of such a waste of power for such an end weighs me down with a constant regret that I had strength to live at all through that time of trouble and shame and sorrow !”

Ruth was very much interested in Mrs. Powys’ confidences, and the fact of having previously heard so much about Stephen from Frank L’Estrange, made it scarcely seem unnatural that it should all be told to

a stranger. She could quite understand the regret and self-reproach which Mrs. Powys expressed and seemed to feel so keenly, but she saw also that she was so much of a nervous invalid as to make the excitement of speaking of it very bad for her, and she was therefore not sorry to see Stephen himself coming towards them. His arrival of course stopped the conversation.

As soon as he had spoken to Ruth he went down to the well to bring his mother her appointed glass of water, after which he said that she had been stationary quite long enough and must go for a turn round the gardens. He was going to summon the man who drew her chair, when she stopped him.

“ But we must not desert Miss Charteris, Stephen, “ until she can join her party. She has been kindly sitting with me almost ever since you left me.”

Stephen turned to Ruth with a pleasant smile.

"I don't think Miss Charteris imagines that I meant to suggest that you should treat her so ungratefully, mother. I was cool enough to hope that she would walk with us until she was summoned away by her friends."

Ruth smiled.

"And I shall like to do so very much. I have been talking all this time to Mrs. Powys, and now I really want to talk to *you*, for we cannot make out why an attempt which Frank L'Estrange made to find you this spring failed so completely."

Mr. Powys looked round at her in surprise.

"I don't really know in what way it failed," he said. "It rested, as I understood, with Mrs. L'Estrange to write to me if she thought of going further in the matter ; and

as I never heard from her, of course I assumed that she had found some one else whom she thought more likely to suit her."

Ruth was for a moment too completely bewildered to speak. What could he mean? Before she had so far recovered from her surprise as to be able to ask a question, her attention was claimed by her sister, who had by this time made her appearance (rather earlier than usual) and now came up to them with Mr. Allonby, who had joined her as soon as she entered the avenue.

Ruth was prepared to resist the same sort of imperative summons which had interrupted her conversation with the Powyses the morning before; but Agatha's tactics now were totally different.

"I am fortunate in finding you here," she said, "for I want you to introduce me to your friends, Ruth."

As soon as Ruth had complied with her

request, she continued, with the bright, graceful, gracious manner which always served her so well,—

“My husband has been telling me of all your kind hospitality to him in former days, Mrs. Powys, and I was hoping to have the pleasure of calling upon you to-day, but this is far better. Meetings out of doors are much pleasanter than formal calls, in a place of this sort, and I am so glad to have met you this morning. Colonel Kennedy scarcely ever comes down among the morning mob—he likes a long walk in the woods better ; but he is looking forward to renewing his acquaintance with you. If you are a walker, Mr. Powys, I dare say he will try to inveigle you into deserting these frivolous haunts another day, and going off with him.”

She had contrived all the time, by glance and gesture, to speak both to Mrs. Powys and her son, and Ruth had therefore no

resource. She could not, without positive rudeness, refuse to begin to talk to Mr. Allonby; and she knew by experience that, once allowed a fair start, he was singularly impossible to stop.

"You were going to walk," Agatha said.
"Do not let me stop you. We can all take a turn together."

And she moved on by Mrs. Powys's chair, keeping Stephen by her side; she made herself as charming as possible to them both, and Ruth was obliged to follow with Mr. Allonby, and give him as much of her attention as she could, while she was longing to be able to get at some explanation of this apparent mystery.

When they had gone once along the avenue and had reached the Kaiser Brunnen, Agatha thought she had done enough, and prepared to break up the party. Repeating her assurances of pleasure at having met

them, and her hopes of seeing them often while they all remained at Homburg, she added,—

“For the present, we must all go our separate ways. *You* are probably going out of the crowd into the quieter part of the gardens, and *we* are going to shop. Ruth, I have promised Mr. Allonby that we will go and protect him in bargaining for strings of onyx beads for his sisters, and you will be of more use than I shall, for I am not strong in German.”

“They all speak English,” began Ruth, though with little hope of protesting successfully.

“But only like parrots,” said Mr. Allonby. “They cannot really tell you anything, except in their own language; and I was in hopes you would come and interpret for me, as I want to get some information about the way in which they prepare these stones for

the market. I fancy they are very much made up for sale."

Ruth recognized with annoyance that Agatha had been too much for her, and she was resigning herself to her fate, when they were suddenly joined by Colonel Kennedy, who had come down for the express purpose of seeing what was going on among them, and of preventing Ruth from being tormented. His first duty, however, was to speak to Mrs. Powys, and Agatha said, quickly,--

"You will find us at the stalls over there, if you want us, Nigel. Come, Ruth! It will be getting near breakfast-time if we dawdle much longer, and Mr. Allonby is waiting for us."

"Don't carry off Ruth," said Colonel Kennedy, looking round; "I want her. I came down to look for her, and I am going to take her up into the town with me to interpret for

me at a little book-shop, too insignificant for its owner to speak English."

Agatha never by any chance openly opposed her husband. She laughed and said—

"Very well, if you want Ruth, of course we must do without her. Will you trust yourself to make purchases with only my supervision, Mr. Allonby, or shall we go and look after Sir Everard, and leave the onyxes till another time, when Ruth can come too? I think I can manage to spend your money judiciously for you; but if you are wishing for sensible and useful information about trade interests, local methods of work, and so on, I should only disgrace myself signally, and we had better all come together later in the day."

Ruth was obliged, in common civility, to answer Mr. Allonby's immediate appeal to her by a promise to go with him "some other time;" and then, to her great relief, he and

Agatha went away together in search of other acquaintances. A grateful glance told Colonel Kennedy that his interference had been acceptable.

"If you and Miss Charteris are going into the town," said Stephen, "do not let us detain you. My mother was only going for a turn in the gardens for the sake of the air, and we can go in your direction if you will allow us."

This suited every one very well, and in another minute they were moving on, Colonel Kennedy walking by Mrs. Powys, and Ruth following with Stephen.

"There has been some strange mistake, Mr. Powys," she began at once. "Mrs. L'Estrange understood that you had left Devonshire and gone to America, so that it was of no use to think of seeking you, and Frank was very much disappointed. Why did you not go to see him that day when

you went round Brideswater," she added, as that recollection suddenly occurred to her. "It would have made everything so easy."

"I had no notion that he remembered me," was the reply. "I had known him some years before as a small boy—a friend of my little brother; but I had neither seen nor heard of him since that time, and had almost forgotten his existence. I was reminded of it by being in that country and hearing his name; but even supposing that I should have called there under other circumstances, I should have given up all idea of it when I heard that he was dying."

"And you never even asked me about him!" Ruth said. "I wish you had."

"I never once thought of him," Stephen answered.

He did not say, or even imply, that he had thought of nothing but herself during

that row across the lake, but somehow she knew that it had been so. She spoke again at once—

“It was that very evening that Mrs. L’Estrange’s agent died, and Frank proposed to her to seek for you. He had retained a warm impression of your kindness to him as a child ; and having heard from some one not very long before that Mr. Hillyer would know all about you, he set his heart on his mother finding you and offering you the agency, and persuaded her to send his cousin to London at once, to see Mr. Hillyer and get your address.”

“I am sure I do not know what I had ever done to earn such kind remembrance,” said Stephen, “though when I was reminded of him, I recollected having been very much attracted by the little fellow when I had him under my charge with Dick. Well, Miss Charteris, so far your story and mine agree

well enough, for all this I heard from Hillyer afterwards. But what happened next? The cousin went to London and saw Hillyer, did he not?"

"Yes. He went up in two or three days, but found Mr. Hillyer out of town. He waited for a week, and then wrote that he had seen him and had heard from him that you had left Devonshire, that he could not give your present address, and that when last he had heard from you, you were on the point of accepting some employment in America. Under these circumstances there seemed no use in making further inquiries, and it was given up. Frank was very much disappointed, especially as when Leonard came home he said that, from all Mr. Hillyer had told him, there could be no doubt that you would have been just the person Mrs. L'Estrange wanted, if there had been any chance of finding you."

Stephen stopped short as she ceased speaking.

“What an extraordinary muddle!” he exclaimed with a laugh. “Either Hillyer or the man who went to him for information must have been dreaming! It happened that I was accidentally in London on business for a couple of days just at that time. It was some time since I had either written to Hillyer or heard from him, and I called at his chambers and saw him. I told him that my attempt at getting work with good pay in America had come to nothing, that I had failed equally in getting an appointment at Glasgow (which I had been to apply for when I first saw you on Brideswater) and that I was, in fact, just where I had always been. He then told me that he was glad to hear it, for that he thought something had turned up which would suit me a great deal better. He recalled Frank L’Estrange to

my memory, and said that his cousin had been there only that morning to ask for my address, which he had given. He told me also that he had gone so far as to say that if I were still free he was sure it was the sort of thing I should like, but that he could not be sure of my being free, as he knew that I had been applying for employment in America. He had further added that he believed I was not then at home, but that any letter addressed to me there would be forwarded at once. I understood him to say that the inquiries were made by a nephew of Mrs. L'Estrange's, who was himself the next heir to the property, and who had finally said that he would report all Hillyer had told him to his aunt, and that then, if she wished to carry the negotiation further, she would write to me direct, at once. I went home the next day, but no letter ever came; and

from that day to this I have heard nothing more of the matter."

"And you never inquired why?"

"No. Why should I? Indeed, how could I? I was told that if I were wanted I should be written to, and when no letter came, of course I thought that Mrs. L'Estrange had found some one else whom she preferred, and that it had been only one more hope just lighted in order to go out! Then I saw young L'Estrange's death in the papers very soon afterwards, and I supposed that his mother perhaps naturally shrank from having anyone, who was connected in her mind only with him."

"On the contrary, it would have been a great reason to her for desiring that you should come," said Ruth. "It has all been very unfortunate; but I cannot even now understand how you can so completely have mistaken what Mr. Hillyer said to Leonard."

"There was no mistake on my part, Miss Charteris, and I don't think Hillyer is a man to muddle things. I remember accurately enough what he told me, for it was a matter of too much importance to me to be forgotten. I dare say it may seem a trifling thing to you, but the idea of it was new life to me, and I confess it was a disappointment to me when nothing came of it. But that is all over long ago, and whatever the mistake was it can't be helped now, so there is no use in thinking any more about it. Mr. L'Estrange probably had many other things to think of and not much interest in the details of my affairs, so that he may easily have misunderstood Hillyer and then have treated it all in the off-hand style which I remember of old was the way of young men with no cares of their own to teach them that even trifles are better for accurate attention!"

He spoke lightly, but still Ruth saw that

it had been a very real disappointment ; she was sorry, and she was also much puzzled as to how Leonard could have contrived to make such a blunder. It was just the sort of carelessness which would annoy Mrs. L'Estrange extremely. She felt convinced that the fault was really his, for she knew that he was thoughtless ; but with the natural instinct of trying to defend him and throw the blame on the absent Mr. Hillyer, she said quickly, with a bright, sudden blush—

“ I am sure that no one will be more sorry for the mistake when he knows it, however it may have arisen ; and no one will be more glad that it is not yet too late to put it right. Mrs. L'Estrange must be written to at once. But one thing makes me hope that the blame of the confusion may be Mr. Hillyer's—he has not even given you the name correctly. His name is not L'Estrange at all, and he is not in the sort of position which

you think may have made him so indifferent to trifles. He is not Mrs. L'Estrange's own nephew, but her husband's ; and though they adopted him years ago, he has nothing to do with the property. He is now, perhaps, since Frank's death, the most *likely* person for her to choose to succeed her, but that is all ; and he has been poor enough and dependent enough all his life to make him quite realize the importance of a good appointment."

Stephen could not help guessing the truth as to her interest in the man she was so eagerly defending. Her changing colour, her half shy eagerness, and her avoidance of his name, even as she explained the mistake, spoke plainly enough.

"I don't think Hillyer mentioned any name, or if he did I missed hearing it. He spoke of a nephew, and was under the impression that he was the next heir ; but

naturally the particulars of work and salary were what I thought of most, and I understood that I was to hear from Mrs. L'Estrange herself if she fancied trying me. After all, it matters very little how the mistake was made ; for either it is past setting to rights, in which case the less said the better, or else, if, as you seem to think, I have still a chance, there is no harm done and I need owe no one a grudge for the mistake, whether it were Hillyer who made it, or—— ?”

“His name is Leonard Barrington,” replied Ruth, “and I am sure he will be very glad that we have met you here before it was too late. You had better write to Mrs. L'Estrange to-day—and so, of course, will I—to explain about it all. What shall——”

“Leonard Barrington !” Stephen exclaimed, with a look of sudden enlighten-

ment, contempt and indignation which checked Ruth's question abruptly. "I quite understand it now. I can easily guess why *he* should choose to——"

He stopped abruptly, warned by the flush of anger with which Ruth looked up that he was venturing on dangerous ground; and he added, gravely and coldly,—

"Under the circumstances, Miss Charteris, the only thing to be done is to let the matter drop entirely. Explanations could do nothing but harm."

They had been slowly following Mrs. Powys' chair through the gardens all this time. It was a little in advance of them and had now reached the road, where it was waiting for them to come up. Ruth stopped. She was no longer flushed and indignant but very pale; and there was a look of pain in her eyes which Stephen could hardly bear to see, as she said, with an effort,—

"Such an insinuation must be explained, Mr. Powys. Tell me, then——"

He interrupted her much more gently than he had spoken before.

"Trust me when I tell you that further explanation is useless, and could only give pain to everybody concerned. Forget the whole thing as soon as you can. I am going off to England this evening, so I shall not be here to remind you of it. I am sorry that my mother knows anything about it, as it will be a disappointment to her, but I will tell her that it has come to nothing, and that she must not think or talk of it any more. As for me, it isn't worth minding. Something else will turn up in time. Forget it all. There is nothing else to be done."

He had spoken quickly and decidedly, as if determined to prevent her from answering, and had walked on so as to join his mother and Colonel Kennedy before she could inter-

rupt him. Ruth was scarcely aware of how it was all managed ; she felt bewildered and oppressed, and was silent until the two groups had separated and she found herself walking up the Ludwigstrasse with Colonel Kennedy.

CHAPTER V.

"WELL, Ruth! Have you solved the mystery?" said Colonel Kennedy. "I gave you a fair chance of satisfying your curiosity."

"And I have only increased it!" answered Ruth.

She tried to speak indifferently; but the tone of her voice at once betrayed that something had gone wrong, and Colonel Kennedy looked at her inquiringly.

"I don't understand it yet," she continued. "It has all been managed very strangely."

And then she made a hasty remark on another subject.

“The solution is something not very creditable to that tiresome fellow, Barrington,” thought Colonel Kennedy to himself. “So much the better, perhaps, if it opens her eyes. He is not half good enough for her. But I am sorry for her, if she is finding it out.”

He understood Ruth, now, well enough to know that the truest kindness was to be silent on the subject, unless she were to speak of her own accord, and he therefore responded to her attempt at indifferent conversation. They went to the book-shop, and then they returned home to breakfast, and Ruth forced herself to appear in the same spirits as usual, though it was a hard task to attend to all the small interests of their daily life.

Breakfast was over; Sir Everard was gone to his own room; Colonel Kennedy had settled himself on the balcony with his books

and a cigar, and the two sisters were alone in the salon. Ruth was on the point of leaving it, when Agatha spoke.

"You look tired, Ruth! You should not do so much before breakfast. Why did you let yourself be dragged about after that woman's chair? There is nothing so tiring. And it is foolish to let yourself be so entirely monopolized by people of that kind. Very likely they know no one else, but that is no reason for your sacrificing yourself to them so completely."

"I wished to be with them," replied Ruth. "And I don't know why you should speak so slightly of them."

Agatha laughed. "Now, don't be absurd, Ruth, and pretend not to understand me! Of course, one would wish to be civil and kind to them—*quite*—if there is one piece of social stupidity more hopelessly tactless than another, it is that of neglecting or

slighting people, you happen to know, because they are not exactly in society! You might as well label yourself 'second-rate' at once. The higher your own position, the more small people you are sure to have on hand, and therefore the idea of losing caste by appearing to know any one of that sort who comes in your way is truly absurd! I would always show every necessary courtesy. But that is very different from devoting yourself exclusively to them for the whole morning, especially when——"

"Well?" said Ruth. "When especially ought I to leave the friends I prefer for those I wish to avoid?"

"You know quite well what I mean," Agatha replied, with perfect good humour. "You can scarcely think it fair or considerate to have allowed Mr. Allonby to follow you here, and then to treat him as capriciously as you seem inclined to do now."

"I am not responsible for Mr. Allonby's coming here, and I see nothing capricious in showing no pleasure in his society when I feel none."

"My dear Ruth! You cannot pretend that you did not understand why he was always our shadow in London, or that you do not know that he has come here entirely on your account!"

"I never thought about him in London at all," said Ruth impatiently, "and I never encouraged him to come here. If any one did, it was *you*; and as you have brought him here, Agatha, it is only fair that you should yourself take the trouble of either entertaining him, or getting rid of him, as suits you best."

She spoke indignantly, and left the room before her sister could reply.

Colonel Kennedy, who had heard all that was said, now spoke through the open window.

"Agatha!" he called, and as his wife joined him on the balcony, he said with some displeasure, "I thought I had told you that I would not have Ruth tormented in that sort of way."

"Oh! it was nothing!" Agatha answered. "I was not really urging her at all; but, of course, no one can ever be got out of one groove into another without some sort of help. There must be a bit of rough intermediate ground; but we shall soon be over it now I hope, and I don't in the least mind her being rather cross for a little while. I will promise you to be very patient myself, and to keep my own temper, so we shan't really quarrel. Luckily, Douglas Allonby is too well satisfied with himself to perceive how much judicious help he needs."

"Leave Ruth to manage her own affairs, Agatha," said Colonel Kennedy. "I desire that you will not attempt to influence her in

any way. You know how excessively I dislike this sort of worldly match-making, and it is degrading to Ruth to be made the unwilling subject of such vulgar scheming."

"Now, really, my dear Nigel, you are too absurd!" replied Agatha, without the slightest irritation. "What have I done that deserves such ugly words? The only way to cure Ruth of dreaming about Leonard is to marry her to some one else, and I have done nothing more than give Douglas Allonby the chance of supplanting him if he can. Of course, it would have been much the best if Mrs. L'Estrange had given Leonard his proper position at once, and let them marry. Ruth would have kept him out of mischief. But I don't fancy, somehow, that he has much strength of character—I very much doubt his standing Mrs. L'Estrange's provoking tests, whatever they are—and though he would be all very well with a good posi-

tion and fortune secured, I don't think he is at all the sort of man to float a poor ménage against the stream with either dignity or success. There is nothing for it, therefore, but getting Ruth to give it up ; and a girl requires some help to free herself from that sort of affair quietly and yet completely."

"True," said Colonel Kennedy, rather drily. "To be off with the old love and on with the new in a few weeks must need skilful generalship, I can believe."

Agatha laughed.

"Of course, I wish Ruth to marry, and to marry well ; it would be an utter waste of her life if she did not ; and the sooner the better. If she dreams on uselessly about Leonard for two or three years, it will be a great disadvantage to her. In the first place, the story would become perfectly well known, and other people would cease to think of her ; and in the second, that sort of indefinite

attachment spoils a girl, and is horribly unbecoming! She would lose her youth and her beauty with her spirits, and you cannot wish that."

"Dull, old and ugly!" said Colonel Kennedy. "Your imagination is lively, Agatha, if you can conceive that those three adjectives will be likely to apply to Ruth in a year or two, as a punishment for the sin of not marrying Allonby against her will!"

"Not against her will, of course," Agatha replied, smiling, "only without a violent fit of romance. I should not wish her to marry *anybody*; just because it might be a good match—but Douglas Allonby is sensible and good, and clever. He would be extremely kind and indulgent to her, and if she wants a field for her energies and 'aspirations,' as people call them, she could hardly choose better. There are large estates and lots of tenantry for her to interest herself about; and as he goes in

for all sorts of social questions, she could amuse herself by helping him and brightening up his speeches and papers a little,—and she would have a position which would give her the command of exactly the society she would like. In fact, Nigel, you must admit that though he may be just a little prosy and self-satisfied and tiresome for a lover, it would not be easy to find anyone likely to make a better husband. I don't see why you should call planning this for Ruth's real happiness 'vulgar scheming.' It would be the best thing possible for her in every way, so please don't be tiresome and try to put spokes in the wheel. Why on earth do you want her to keep to her childish fancy for Leonard?"

"I don't!" said Colonel Kennedy impatiently. "I believe that her love for him is a childish illusion, and I am glad that the delay which Mrs. L'Estrange's decision must cause may save her from sacrificing her life

to it. Ruth is worthy of some better fate, than either to keep a youth like Barrington 'out of mischief,' as you call it, or to be the wife of a well-meaning prig like Allonby. In either case, there could be no free growth for her. 'Vulgar,' in your own sense of the word, your schemes may not be; but is it a high view that you take of life or marriage when you own that you are trying to persuade, almost to trick her, into marrying a man for whom she can have no real affection? If you banish all deep feeling, take all the poetry out of life, it is a poor sort of existence that you leave."

"My dear Nigel! How fearfully romantic you are when you do let it break out now and then! Of course, a marriage with Douglas Allonby would be rather prosy—but then, young men with large fortunes, unexceptionable characters, good tempers, good looks and good manners—*and* souls full of poetry

—are not to be easily found. It is no use expecting to have everything ; and if you must give up something—why surely the poetry is the least indispensable !”

“I doubt it—to *Ruth*,” was the reply. “Anyhow, Agatha, remember I am in earnest in saying that I will have no attempt made to influence her. Let her decide for herself, unpersuaded and unreprieved.”

He opened his book again as he spoke, and Agatha, merely saying—

“Then you will be responsible if she ends her days as the maiden aunt of the family,”—retreated into the salon. The next moment, however, she came back to say : “Nigel ! When the time arrives for Ethel and Maggie to come out, I shall exercise all my fascinations (if I have any left) on the authorities at the Horse Guards, and get you sent off to India, or somewhere, for a few years, so as to leave myself a clear field to marry them

to my satisfaction, unhampered by poetical visions."

"I shall have left the army by that time, and settled down as a Scotch laird," answered Colonel Kennedy without looking up, and Agatha left him again. He was not, however, destined to pursue his studies without interruption, for a few minutes later Ruth came on to the balcony.

"Nigel! I want you to help me without asking any questions. Mr. Powys starts for England this afternoon. I must see him and speak to him alone before he goes. Will you manage it for me?"

Colonel Kennedy closed his book.

"Certainly I will. When do you wish it to be—and where? But I need not ask. The sooner the better, of course—and it must be out-of-doors—for to see any one alone here anywhere else is impossible. Come out with me then, and I'll see about it."

Ruth went silently to fetch her hat, and Colonel Kennedy stood for a moment on the balcony.

“Poor child!” he thought. “Illusions must die, no doubt, but sometimes they die hard.” Perhaps the sigh that followed the thought was not exclusively caused by sympathy with Ruth’s present troubles.

“Take a book down to one of the seats near the Stahl Brunnen,” Colonel Kennedy said, as Ruth joined him again. “There is not a quieter place about, at this time of day. I will go and call at their lodgings—Mrs. Powys told me where they were—and send him out to you. I suppose he will understand why you are likely to want to see him?”

“Yes,” Ruth answered gravely. “He will know that all this mystery must be cleared up before I write to Mrs. L’Estrange. You will trust me to manage it my own way,

Nigel,—afterwards I will tell you what I can,—but please say nothing, even to Agatha, about my having anything to do with it.”

He gave the assurance she asked, and the next moment they separated, Colonel Kennedy going towards the English Church, near which the Powyses were lodging, while Ruth walked slowly down the narrow path under the arching acacias to the appointed place by the Stahl Brunnen, and chose a shady seat. She tried hard to resist the conviction that the full explanation which she had determined to insist upon having from Mr. Powys could only be what must give her acute pain. She told herself that it was absurd to suppose it possible that Leonard could really have wilfully misrepresented what he had heard. What motive could he have had? She hated herself for the disloyalty which could even allow the idea of doubting his truth and honour, and yet in her heart she knew that

she *did* doubt, and that she shrank from the coming interview with Mr. Powys, because she dreaded to hear what must convince her that those doubts were justified. Everything near her was intensely still. The large shady space round the well was perfectly quiet, for no one ever came there at that hour of the day, and the only trace to remind her of the life and stir which had filled the avenues an hour or two ago was the neat, fair-haired Brunnen Mädchen, sitting at her post but sewing busily, as if not expecting any possible interruption.

The sunlight found its way here and there through the branches of the large acacia trees as they were moved by a slight breeze, and Ruth watched the dancing spots of light on the ground before her, brilliant one moment and gone the next, and wondered if through life every dream of more than common happiness was to resemble them, and

be, in the words Mr. Powys had used in the morning, "just one hope more lighted in order to go out." Then she told herself that it was morbid nonsense to dwell upon such fears, to make herself miserable about such a trifle; no doubt all could easily be explained; Mr. Powys must have received a false impression of whatever were the facts of the case, which Leonard would at once remove. She wished that he would come—and yet, when she heard his step approaching, she felt almost inclined to escape before he saw her, and so avoid hearing what she had sent for him on purpose that he might tell her.

"Colonel Kennedy told me that you wished to speak to me, Miss Charteris, and that I should find you here."

Ruth looked up as he spoke. Hers was one of the natures to which the necessity for speaking or acting never fails to give courage and self-control for the time.

"Thank you for complying so quickly with a request that was perhaps cool from a new acquaintance," she said courteously. "But I am sure you must feel as I do, that what you said this morning cannot be left unexplained. Will you be kind enough to tell me what you really meant?"

Stephen remained standing by the bench on which she was seated, leaning against the end of it. There was a pause before he spoke. Then he said quietly—

"I spoke without thinking, Miss Charteris, in the excitement and surprise of the moment, and I would rather not be asked to explain. Of course, I am quite aware that if I do not I must give up all idea of applying for this agency, but that concerns only myself."

"It is not merely a question of the agency," said Ruth, "for what you *did* say implied too much to be left as it stands. Your words could bear but one meaning—and it is only

common justice to give a chance of such an impression—which must have arisen from some misunderstanding—being removed. I think I have a right to ask you to explain them.”

“Even when I tell you that I regret having spoken them?”

“Even then,” she answered. “Since they cannot be recalled, they *must* be explained.”

“Why should you seek to know what can only give you pain? These people are your relations, are they not?”

“Not in the least—only old and intimate friends—but that has nothing to do with it. Mr. Powys, nothing could give me greater pain than hints and half truths. Let me know really what you believe to have happened.”

“What *did* happen was, that Mr. Barrington and I met at a supper-party on the evening of the day on which we had both been

to Hillyer's chambers. We each knew the other's name, but I did not know that he had any connection with Mrs. L'Estrange, or Throstlethwaite, while he, of course, knew who I was. After what passed that night, I can understand that I was about the last person he would desire should come to be his aunt's agent, if, as you tell me, his succession to the property depends upon her pleasure. It was easy for him, in writing to her the next day, to repeat accurately enough all that he had heard of me—withholding only the fact that he had my address, and knew that a letter would reach me quickly. He did this, and there is an end of it."

"Why should he have dreaded your coming?" asked Ruth quickly; and Stephen, rightly judging that to tell her all was now the truest kindness, answered at once,—

"Because it was not the sort of place at which he would wish it to be known that he

had been seen. I am very seldom in London, and I went with a cousin with whom I had been dining, scarcely knowing where he was taking me. The details of it would not interest you. Play—and very high play—seemed to be the object of the meeting. I did not join in it, for I could not have afforded to lose even the most trifling sum ; but I looked on, and I saw Mr. Barrington play and lose heavily. From what was said afterwards by my cousin, I gathered that he was not in the habit of playing, and that it was the first time he had been there. Towards the end of the evening there was a disturbance. One man, a stranger among them, I believe, cheated, and I, being merely a looker-on, detected him, for I had seen the thing done before in the same way. This made me rather prominent for the moment, so that I know my name was known to Mr. Barrington. That is really all, Miss Char-

teris, and nothing so very bad ; but Mr. Barrington might naturally think that if his chance of the property depended on Mrs. L'Estrange's confidence in him, it would be wiser to keep me at a safe distance from her."

Ruth had listened in silence, and even when Stephen stopped she did not speak. She knew that he was telling her the simple truth without exaggeration, and she felt, with a crushing sense of shame and pain, all the weakness and baseness of Leonard's selfish conduct.

The consciousness of what she was suffering was intolerable to Stephen ; the silence oppressed him, and he spoke again,—

"You asked for the whole truth, Miss Charteris, and I have obeyed you ; but I blame myself for the folly which has led to your knowing it, and has made it seem of more importance than it is. It is not the

sort of thing that you can know anything about really—and I know ladies have a mysterious horror of any form of gambling—but I speak truly in telling you that I believe in Mr. Barrington's case it was no confirmed habit, but merely an accidental temptation—an experiment—and, after all, one which many if not most men with any money to spare try once, at least. I do not suppose there is any need for anxiety about him—he fortunately did not see its attractive side, and I think left the place thoroughly disgusted.”

Ruth looked up now, very pale, but perfectly self-possessed.

“Probably. I am sorry he did it, for he could not afford to play experiments with money any more than you say that you could; but I can believe in his being led on to join in it, meaning no harm. What I cannot conceive is that he could——”

She could not say it.

Stephen, divided between indignant contempt for Leonard and intense pity for her, scarcely knew what to say.

"The temptation was great," he said at last, gravely. "He must have felt that I had it in my power to destroy Mrs. L'Estrange's trust in him entirely. He knew nothing of me; he naturally disliked the idea of feeling himself at my mercy, as it were—and the stake was a valuable one. Probably he yielded to a momentary impulse when he first wrote, and afterwards it must have seemed impossible to retract."

Ruth could not discuss it; she turned to another branch of the subject.

"At any rate, it can all be explained now," she said. "When Mrs. L'Estrange wrote to me two days ago, she had not even heard of any one whom she wished should fill the place. Judging from what you were told

of it, do you believe that you would like it ?”

There was something in Ruth's straightforward frankness which seemed to compel frankness in return.

“I am sure that I should,” was Stephen's reply ; “but I need not therefore have it. Something else will turn up in time, and I would not have troubled waters stirred again on my account. If, as I fancy from all you have said, Mr. Barrington now stands in her son's place to Mrs. L'Estrange, it would be useless cruelty to tell her this. Knowing it, she could hardly help offering me the place, and I could hardly refuse it ; but my presence could only give her pain, and therefore, Miss Charteris, we had better let it rest.”

“Frank's memory is more to Mrs. L'Estrange than any one living ever can be,” replied Ruth ; “and the fact of his having so

earnestly desired that you should, if possible, be the one to work with her and help her, would more than counterbalance——. I think she ought to know and decide for herself. It cannot be right that either she or you should suffer for no real reason.”

“ I don’t presume to suppose that she will lose much in not having my services,” said Stephen. “ At any rate, she will never know they were to be had, and a loss you are unconscious of cannot be very bad to bear! As for me, I shall do well enough as I am till I find something better. I know my mother was inflicting a long story on you this morning—I was sure of it when I joined you—but you must take it with large allowance for her weak health and low spirits. She *will* blame herself and try to pose me as a martyr, if she can find any one to listen to her ; but we are very happy and comfortable, and might as easily change for the worse as for the

better—so I am making no alarming sacrifice.”

“Still, a change which would double your income, give you really interesting work, and restore you to your proper position in society, must have attractions for you; and it seems to me that for every reason the truth ought to be told,” said Ruth, with an effort.

“For every reason but one,” was the answer. “It’s being told will give *you* pain. That is reason enough for letting it alone. It is not worth thinking about any more. I go to England this afternoon, and shall look out for something else. If you will spare a little time to my mother, now and then, it will be a real kindness. As for all this—I am sorry that my stupidity has been the cause of your knowing it; but it may rest absolutely between us—and you, I hope, will soon forget it.”

He spoke quickly and decidedly—almost brusquely—and, before Ruth could answer, he simply raised his hat and left her without further farewell.

CHAPTER VI.

"FORGET it all,"—Stephen had said more than once, and even while she recognized their kind intention, the words echoed in Ruth's ears like a mockery when he had gone, and she was left alone to realize the full meaning of all that had passed.

Illusions must die—as Colonel Kennedy had reflected that morning—with but few exceptions it is the natural law of their being—and in proportion to the happiness they have given while they lasted must be the suffering when they come to be extinguished. It is perhaps one of the most painful of the many

forms in which the insecurity of all earthly happiness can be brought home to anyone, at any age ; while to the quick sensibilities and blind, loving confidence of an inexperienced and warm-hearted girl, there can be no more intolerable torture than the sudden unveiling of the wretched skeleton which is the only reality beneath all the fancied perfections supplied by her own imagination.

At this moment Ruth had to bear such a revelation in all its bitterness. She did not, she could not, doubt the absolute truth of all the facts just told to her, and neither could she differ from the inference which had been drawn from them. She dwelt comparatively little on the main incident in the story ; the loss of even a large sum of money by gambling was nothing in her eyes compared with the rest.

It was foolish and wrong undoubtedly, but

she did not believe the practice to be habitual, and it made little impression upon her. What chilled her to the heart was the utter want of strength and courage, of truth and honour, shown in the subsequent concealment. It was cowardly and mean ; it was neither manly nor gentlemanly ; it was dishonourable by Stephen ; it was a betrayal of Mrs. L'Estrange's confidence ; and it was cruelly heartless by Frank. The selfish calculation which had prompted the first untruth was revolting, and the moral cowardice which had persisted in it was despicable.

Ruth saw it all, and saw it with a sense of sickening shame and misery. For a long time after Stephen had left her, she sat there perfectly still, conscious only of pain which left her no power to think. She saw, as if she were in a dream, what passed around her. She noticed the little Brunnen Mädchen's bright, happy smile, when her uniformed

"schatz" made his appearance by the well, for an evidently unexpected and possibly unauthorized interview.

They were out of hearing, but Ruth could see that they were happy together, and as she watched them and recalled all the joy she herself had often felt when with Leonard, all her love and trust, her faith in his goodness, and her confidence in what she had believed to be his high ideal of life, she wondered bitterly whether also to the merry little - German girl disenchantment would come in time—whether life was really only a series of disappointments to everyone. How long she had remained there in this unresisted dream of mere pain she could not have told, but approaching steps and voices roused her in an instant, for she dreaded seeing anyone she knew ; the sounds, however, were not English, and the next moment a

couple of Prussian officers appeared within the shady circle.

As if by magic the "schatz" at once disappeared, and the girl was at her post without a thought apparently of anything but of filling glasses with bubbling water, if they should be wanted. The incident was trivial, but it served to restore Ruth's half paralyzed faculties, and struggling to shake off the depression which had hitherto overpowered her, she began really to think of the position.

Turning from the question of her own relations with Leonard, she faced the consideration of what she ought to do. Even while she admitted the generous kindness of Stephen's offer to let the matter be passed over in silence, she shrank from the recollection of the cold disdain which he could not conceal whenever he alluded to Leonard. He scorned even to resent so despicable an

injury! Her own face burned with shame and indignation at the remembrance, and then grew white with the thought that it was left for *her* to decide what was to be the end of it all.

Mr. Powys meant to spare her by his renunciation of all idea of applying for this agency. She was too just not to believe him to be sincere, but she did not see how she could possibly allow him to make the sacrifice; and yet in that case she must herself be the means of bringing not only ruin but disgrace upon Leonard. The idea at first was intolerable. She felt that she could not do it, that it could not possibly be expected of her.

Then her mind went back to that last evening of Fränk's life when she had promised him to do all she could for his mother. If she accepted Mr. Powys' offer of silence, she should be not only sinning against truth

and justice but breaking her faith. Her natural sense of right was too clear to allow her to blind herself for long as to what she ought to do, but to make up her mind to do it was hard. Loving Leonard as she did, (and not even her perception of his want of moral strength, though it pained her acutely, could suddenly kill her love for him) how could she deliberately disgrace him, deprive him of everything he valued most in life, and in doing it of course alienate him from herself, while knowing that in his love for her lay the one best chance of his redeeming the past? How could she ever bear to meet Mr. Powys constantly, when as a necessary consequence of his coming to Throstlethwaite Leonard would be banished from it? She almost felt that however wrong it might be she must keep silence. Mr. Powys had decidedly refused to act for himself, he had voluntarily and quite sincerely begged her

to forget it all, and why should she not accept the offer?

Having reached this point was but to begin the struggle over again. She had not a nature to which it was possible to shut out the truth, and yet the temptation to choose the wrong, even knowingly, was very great. The consequences of choosing right seemed almost more than she dared to face.

All joy and brightness were gone from the thought of the future, but though her love could never again recover from the shock and be what it had been before, it was still filling her heart; even though it was alloyed with pity and contempt it was there, and it prompted an attempt at self-deception by suggesting that her first duty was to Leonard, and that in bringing disgrace upon him she would be shutting out every hope of his ever rising to better things. Conscience replied that to share his secret and support

him in it would only be to lower herself without raising him, and that the truest devotion would be to face the worst with him and help him to bear it.

The position was a very hard one, and she remained under the acacia trees forgetful of how time was passing, conscious chiefly that whichever way she decided she must be wretched. She was roused to a recollection of other things by Colonel Kennedy coming to look for her and saying, as he came up to her seat,—

“It is past two o’clock, Ruth, and Agatha is wondering what has become of you, and why you do not come in to have some luncheon.”

Ruth rose quickly.

“I am very sorry,” she said. “I quite forgot the time.”

They walked slowly homewards together. Colonel Kennedy was too much concerned

by the signs of suffering in her face and voice to attempt to make conversation, and Ruth was considering what to say to him. The necessity for motion and speech had restored her fully to herself, and she had shaken off instantaneously all the harassing doubts of the past hours. "Truth at all costs," she kept repeating silently to herself. She saw clearly now that there could be no choice. To tell the truth was the only right course, and it must really be the best for every one, whatever immediate pain it might cause. It must be told—but to as few people as possible—to no one, in fact, but to Mrs. L'Estrange; and yet she felt that she must say *something* to her brother-in-law.

"Nigel," she said, as they reached the door of their lodgings, "have you seen Mr. Powys?"

"Not since I sent him to you."

"He goes to England this afternoon. He

proposed that all this mystery should rest unexplained. Of course that cannot be, and I shall write to Mrs. L'Estrange at once ; but I want you not to mind my saying no more than that—not to ask what it all means."

"I will ask nothing and say nothing," was the reply. "Only just this. Writing to Mrs. L'Estrange will be a hard task for you—I cannot pretend not to see as much as that. Now, can I spare you the pain by writing to her myself out of the depths of my ignorance, and letting her inquire, if she cares to know more than I can tell her?"

Ruth was sorely tempted to accept this release from the difficult duty before her. For a moment she hesitated. Then low and slowly came the words,—

"Thank you for thinking of it, but I must write myself; the truth must be told, let it be ever so hard to tell."

And then she went on up the stairs and entered the salon.

"I am sorry that I forgot what o'clock it was," she said, in apology to Agatha and to Sir Everard. "But I don't want any luncheon; it is too hot to eat. I will go and take my hat off."

Almost as she spoke she left the room again, and went to her own. She felt that she could not stay and talk unconcernedly about all the trifles of the day.

Her bed-room was a small one, and the afternoon sun beat fiercely upon it, even though the Venetian shutters were closed. It was dark and hot and stifling, and as bare of comfortable furniture as the bed-rooms of lodging-houses at German watering-places are apt to be; but solitude was the one thing which Ruth felt she must have, even at the price of physical comfort, and she remained there.

An hour later, Agatha entered the room. Ruth was lying on her bed, but evidently was not asleep, for she spoke as her sister opened the door.

"My dearest Ruth!" Agatha exclaimed. "I was afraid you had a headache when you came in; but this little oven of a place will only make it worse! Sir Everard and Nigel are both out, so do come to the sofa in the sitting-room, which is quite cool, and rest there till it is time to dress."

Ruth had risen while her sister spoke, and was now standing by the glass, arranging her disordered hair as well as the dim light allowed.

"My headache is nothing, thanks," she said; "but I will come to the cooler room now. I was coming, at any rate, to tell you that I am not going with you this afternoon."

A party had been arranged to drive over

to Frankfort, and dine in the Palm Gardens there; and they were to start at half-past four. Ruth was sure that her present refusal to go would be the signal for a wearisome argument with Agatha.

"Oh! your head will be all the better for the long drive in the cool evening," said Agatha. "If you keep quite quiet for the next hour, you will be well enough to go, I hope."

"I am well enough now," was Ruth's reply. "I don't care to shelter myself behind false excuses, Agatha. I am tired and my head aches, and I shall be glad to stay at home alone and write some letters quietly; but my real reason for not going is that, after what you said this morning, I will join no more parties to be thrown upon Mr. Allonby as I was yesterday evening. I will make it clear that I, at any rate, had nothing to do with his being encouraged to follow us here."

The sisters were now in the sitting-room together, and each was fully determined to carry her point. As Colonel Kennedy was safe in the reading-room at the Kursaal, Agatha had no hesitation whatever in ignoring his injunctions to leave Ruth alone to decide for herself; but she had far too much tact to attempt either to insist or openly to persuade. She answered at once—

“You are quite mistaken, Ruth, if you think that I do not know that his coming here now is injudicious and premature. But it is absurd to expect that a man in these matters will go exactly the pace you choose; and even if it is sooner than you like to have to decide, he has a perfect right to a hearing, while nothing can be easier than for you to require to have time to consider the matter, and so forth, if you really cannot make up your mind to settle it at once and get it over.”

Feeling that anything would be more endurable than a long discussion of such a question, Ruth went straight to the point at once.

"The last thing I want, Agatha, is time to consider. I know my own mind perfectly well, and I am neither to be cheated into unintentionally involving myself in a difficulty, nor persuaded into doing it voluntarily. If you dislike my abrupt way of putting a stop to the thing at once, I cannot help it. It is your own fault. You had no right to encourage him to come here—if it is for me that he comes—when you knew all the time that it was impossible I should ever care about him."

Agatha raised her eyes from her lace-work, quite unruffled.

"My dear child, don't excite yourself so dreadfully about it! You have it in your own power to decide exactly as you please,

whenever you choose ; but you need not be so indignant with my poor little attempts to give you the opportunity of making a marriage so obviously likely to ensure your happiness. What could be better for you both ? But having had the chance, if you choose to reject it, I have nothing more to say. I confess I did hope that you might be induced now to give up a foolish dream and prefer a fate which offers you a prospect of real happiness ; and I own that I still wish you not to decide hastily, when probably a very little time would enable you to——”

Ruth interrupted her.

“Agatha, I hate to hear you talk in that way. You smother it in gentle, plausible phrases, but you mean that you thought it possible that I might be persuaded into marrying a man I did not care for more easily just now than at any other time, and therefore you brought him here ; and I say

that it was cruel to him and insulting to me."

"Not at all. I only hoped that you might see the folly of encouraging yourself in wasting your life on a mere fancy; and that, giving up the girlish nonsense of an ideal marriage (they never turn out well, even if they do come off!), you might accept a position which you are admirably fitted to fill, and which has scarcely a single drawback. Granted that Mr. Allonby is no hero of romance, by no means your ideal, you are so much the safer from finding out too late that you have made a fool of yourself; and you need have no qualms of conscience as to not giving him what he would not know how to deal with. A passionate attachment would altogether puzzle him! He is a good, sensible man, who would be kind and affectionate and liberal; he would be easily made as happy as he wants to be, and you would have a sphere of

life exactly suited to you ; you would have just the sort of duties and responsibilities which would be the most interesting to you, and the sort of pleasures you would most enjoy. It is exactly the marriage which I should imagine possible and desirable for you now. But if you despise the happiness it offers, and still prefer dreaming of a shadow to grasping a reality, of course I cannot help it. For my own part, I have no faith in ideals. People think them mighty giants for a time, but generally find that they sink into remarkably insignificant pigmies as soon as they are tried in daily life, where common sense reigns instead of imagination ! However, it is your own affair. I don't want to tease you, though I *do* desire your happiness. Don't go to Frankfort if you dislike it ; though, of course, staying at home under plea of a headache will not really cut the knot of the dilemma. If Mr. Allonby means to

“speak now, he will do it before he goes away, somehow.”

Agatha had said her say, and Ruth had stood there and listened to her rather long speech without protest or interruption. That, at any rate, was something gained; and Agatha, without leaving time for any answer, rose from her seat and laid down her work. Stopping as she passed to bestow an affectionate caress on her sister, to which Ruth passively submitted, she went to her own room, saying,

“Well, I, at any rate, must think of dressing.”

With a gesture and sigh of unspeakable weariness, Ruth let herself drop into a chair by the open window, and clasping her hands upon the sill, laid her head upon them. Agatha's instincts had rarely guided her more serviceably than when they dictated all that she had said so quietly, and she could

not have given herself a better chance of victory. Ruth might really estimate her sister's theories at their true worth, but in her present state of mind every sentence had told, and she perceived, for the first time, that there *might* be a temptation even in such an escape from her present wretchedness.

Agatha had very skilfully sketched the life offered to her from the side which was most likely to attract her. If she were to determine to marry Mr. Allonby, she should not only free herself at once from all the complicated anxieties and wearing pain otherwise in store for her, but she should be throwing herself into a life full of movement and interest ; one which she could so fill with occupations and duties as to leave herself no time to think. The temptation was not, however, one that could do more than pass through her mind, to be instantly rejected with a shudder of repulsion at the thought that she could ever

have admitted it, even for a moment, as a possibility. Let life be ever so hard, she would never degrade herself by a marriage from any other motive than real affection.

The thought passed absolutely from her mind ; but it had served to bring out even more vividly her present suffering, and she felt keenly Agatha's worldly-wise comments upon "ideals" and their usual fate. She had never been in the habit of talking much to any one about her own ideas of love and marriage ; but, like all girls, she had had very distinct views of her own on the subject, and they had been what Agatha would have called "high-flown and romantic and utterly unpractical."

The rapidity with which many of her friends went through one love affair after another, "getting over" a disappointment and marrying some other person within a few

weeks or months, had always filled her with contemptuous indignation. Her conception of the sort of affection which alone could justify marriage, or make it possible, had been of a feeling stronger and deeper than any other, about which there could be no mistake, and which must fill the whole being with all the resistless force of an Atlantic tide wave ; a feeling which might or might not have to be struggled against, and might even have to be suppressed and silenced, but which certainly could not have another similar affair just precede or just follow it ; which might take years, or might need only days, to grow, but which it *must* take more than days or weeks to kill !

Her dream had been of an affection intense and unselfish, of a sympathy so perfect, that even the inevitable differences of two natures should serve only to widen the sphere for both. She had believed this best

of all earthly blessings to have fallen to her lot, and she had prized it with a gratitude beyond words.

One or two tiny "rifts within the lute" had undoubtedly shown themselves within the last few weeks, but they had been so tiny that she had closed her eyes to them for the time, though now, when the truth was suddenly revealed to her, they recurred vividly to her mind. She tried to picture to herself what sort of future could be in store for her with Leonard, when all the reverence was thus rudely taken from her affection for him; and she shrank from the thought of ever becoming the wife of a man whom even for a moment she had despised—of whose conduct she could only say in her heart, "It is base." Then she hated herself for thus harshly judging him for having once yielded to temptation—a temptation, too, prompted probably in great measure by his eager desire to

have a position to offer to her—and of which she could estimate the strength by the almost irresistible impulse she had herself felt only an hour or two ago to fall into the same error, and, for the sake of her own happiness, basely to hold back the truth which it was her duty to tell.

Affection and pity conquered every other feeling when she thought of the shame which her words must bring upon him ; and she resolved that if he did not himself break with her in anger, she would be faithful and true to him as if she had been already his wife, and would throw all her power into helping him to rise above this wretched mistake in his life, and to bear the consequences of his failure bravely, with a firm resolution to fall back no more.

It would be a different life from that of her girlish dreams—one full of weariness and pain—for Leonard must have much of humi-

liation and disappointment to suffer, and her instinct told her that he would bear neither patiently ; but she loved him too well not to try to believe that he had only weakly yielded to a momentary strong temptation, and had then failed in courage to confess the untruth. She thought that the natural, inevitable, keen regret and self-reproach afterwards, might well account for his uncertain moods lately, and that the present discovery would really relieve him from a painfully false position, which must have been secretly intolerable to him.

When it came near the time for the rest of the party to set off, Ruth retreated to her own room again, to escape from questions and persuasions.

Agatha looked in for a moment to beg that she would take care of herself, and remember that she had eaten nothing since breakfast. She said she had given full directions to

ensure her having everything she could want, and in five minutes more they were gone, and Ruth thankfully realized that she should have the whole evening to herself in undisturbed solitude.

She was a good deal exhausted by all the emotions of the day, and her headache was by this time no fiction ; but after an hour's sleep on the sofa of the cool, silent salon, she was able to take her dinner when it was brought to her, and then went into the fresh air on the balcony to nerve herself to the task before her.

She had made up her mind what to do, but it was not easy to begin. At length, however, she went in and got her writing-case. She wrote first to Mrs. L'Estrange, a short note, merely telling her of the meeting with Stephen Powys, and of his being still available if she felt inclined to put herself in communication with him. She added a few

words of favourable comment, and ended by saying :

“ There seems to have been some mistake in the report of his engagements when you inquired about him in the spring, which I hope Leonard may now be able to explain. I only write to tell you the fact, and to give you Mr. Powys’ address in Devonshire, where a letter will find him now, as he started for England this afternoon.”

Ruth wrote thus because she had finally decided on referring Mrs. L’Estrange to Leonard for an explanation, and so putting him in the best position that was possible, by enabling him to make an apparently voluntary confession. She felt that it would very much lessen the subsequent pain and humiliation of it all if Mrs. L’Estrange could be kept in ignorance of the fact that Mr. Powys had spoken, and could believe the real truth

to be known only to herself by Leonard's own avowal of it.

This course seemed to Ruth by far the best for everybody; but though it might be the least painful of the two in the end, and the most likely to produce a good result, it was unquestionably the most difficult at the moment, for it involved a letter to Leonard himself which it was very hard to write. *He* must know all that had passed, and then Ruth could only hope that he would do all that could be done to atone for the past by perfect frankness now, and by patient endurance of whatever well-deserved humiliation might be his punishment.

It was a letter written at the cost of much thought, and not a few tears.

“MY DEAR LEONARD,

“You will be surprised to see a letter from me, and at first you will be pleased, but

when you have read it I know that it can only give you pain. That it costs me fully as much to write it, is so simply true that I scarcely feel that I need say so ; you could not know me at all and not believe that it must be so. I will say what I have to say as shortly as I can. The day before yesterday we met Mr. Powys (Frank's friend) who is here with his mother. An accident made me acquainted with her. I recognized him as the gentleman whom I met by the lake that afternoon in April, and I soon learned their name.

“ I need not repeat in detail how I found out that Mr. Powys, though he had heard from Mr. Hillyer of Mrs. L'Estrange's inquiries about him, could explain as little as I could how it was that nothing had come of them ; he had merely supposed that she had preferred some one else, for he had received an impression that your name was L'Estrange.

The moment I mentioned your real name, his surprise, and a few hasty words, showed that he then believed himself to understand it all.

“He would have drawn back and kept silence, but, for every reason, that could not be. I insisted on having a full explanation, and it was given, and I *cannot* disbelieve it. Mr. Powys gave it reluctantly and very generously, making as little of it as was possible—admitting that under the circumstances the temptation to suppress him must have been great, and that, having once hastily yielded to it, you might feel it almost impossible to retract what you had said. He refused to make any application himself to Mrs. L'Estrange now, and urged me to be entirely silent about him, as he did not wish to ‘have troubled waters stirred again on his account.’

“I have not seen him since he left me after

saying this; and he is gone back to his work in Devonshire, determined to make no move in the matter. But that cannot possibly be allowed by us. I could not accept for you a sacrifice so humiliating, and I could not myself feel justified in concealing the truth. The temptation to do it was great, and it has cost me much to resolve on doing right, but I am sure that you will really be glad that I have forced myself to speak.

“From the very strength of the temptation I have felt to be silent now myself, I can understand how it might be possible for you, in the excitement of the first moment, to write as you wrote; and, once done, to undo it would have been too terrible a humiliation to be easily incurred voluntarily; but I know now why you have seemed so oppressed and anxious ever since—it must have been almost more than you could bear to keep such a secret, even though you felt confession of it

to be beyond your strength—and I am sure you will really rejoice that this accident makes further silence impossible, and forces you to tell the truth to Mrs. L'Estrange and to do justice to Mr. Powys.

“ I have written to her by this post—but I have said only that I find Mr. Powys is still free, and have referred her to you for all further explanation. It will come best from yourself, and—I *could* not write it. It grieves me to the heart to think of the pain and shame before you, but yet I feel sure that you must really welcome the chance of braving both for the sake of truth ; and whatever the consequences of the full confession which must now be made to Mrs. L'Estrange, surely *together* we may bear them without difficulty ?

“ There could have been no true happiness for us in a prosperity bought at the cost of honour and truth ; but when we have nothing

with which to reproach ourselves, there will be very little need to dread even poverty and hard work.

"Write to me once—and soon. I know you will feel that I have done right—that, indeed, I could not have done otherwise for you any more than for myself, but I should like you to say it. Of course, Mrs. L'Estrange need never know that I have any knowledge of it all.

" Ever yours,

" RUTH CHARTERIS.

" P.S.—I write to Mr. Powys to tell him that I cannot accept his generous offer of silence, either for you or for myself, and that I have written to Mrs. L'Estrange to mention my meeting with him, referring her to you for all explanation. I say, also, that I have written *fully* to you."

The tumult of conflicting feelings in her

heart had seemed to make all expression of it impossible, and Ruth was thoroughly dissatisfied with her letter. It appeared so poor and cold, conveying neither her true sense of the position in which he had placed himself, nor even much warmth of sympathy for his present suffering, and yet she could not make it better. She had too many brothers and cousins, too much experience of young men as they showed themselves in family relationships, not to know that the one thing above all others to be avoided was the slightest possibility of being felt "a bore." She must say as little as she could. She must avoid the shadow of an assumption of speaking from a higher point, or of appearing to dictate, while her own taste and instinct revolted from the common feminine resources of either "preachiness" or an appeal to his feeling for herself personally. Meagre and bald as it was, the letter must go and take

its chance. She would not doubt either his affection or his generosity, so as to fear that he would resent what she had done, or misunderstand her in any way.

She wrote her short note to Mr. Powys ; she posted all three letters herself ; and being by that time too much worn out to face the others on their return home, she went to bed soon after nine, tired enough to ensure sleep.

CHAPTER VII.

THE next few days passed uneventfully enough. Ruth had made up her mind that she should have to undergo the disagreeable interview with Mr. Allonby which Agatha seemed to consider inevitable, and was proportionately pleased when he left Homburg on the day after the dinner at Frankfort, without either making any unwelcome demonstration towards her, or appearing to have taken offence. She saw him in the morning, but though he did not molest her in any way, neither did he avoid her, and he took leave of her in a quiet, friendly manner

which quite reassured her. She wondered for a moment whether Agatha's hopes had not been built on a very slight foundation, and whether her own vanity had not made her take alarm without much reason. It must either have been so, or else he had taken the hint which her manner had been intended to convey with greater quickness than she should have thought probable, and had responded to it with more tact and delicacy than she had given him credit for possessing.

Be this as it might, he was gone, and that was one trouble over. She did not suspect that Agatha, determined that she should do nothing so absurd and irrational as to refuse him positively, had indulged in a little private and delicate manœuvring, and had contrived to make him understand that though, of course, all the childish nonsense about Leonard Barrington, which had been county

gossip, was a thing of the past, her sister was scarcely yet quite prepared to enter upon a definite engagement with anyone else.

Agatha had hinted and suggested, with apparently the warmest sisterly interest in his ultimate success, and had counselled patience and a temporary withdrawal as certain to change Ruth's present strong feeling of friendship and esteem and admiration into the sort of affection which he desired. It was done gracefully and skilfully, and Agatha triumphed in her success in thus quickly getting rid of him now, when his failure was certain, and yet retaining him as an acknowledged lover, almost pledged to come forward again at some future time. Ruth must learn common sense by degrees, she thought, and she enjoyed the consciousness of what her indignation would have been had she only suspected that diplomatic conversation in the Frankfurt gardens. How Nigel, too, would have

snubbed her little manœuvre in the bud, if he had but known of it! How grateful they ought to be to her for thus ignoring their fancies and so preventing Ruth from throwing away finally such a brilliant prospect as if it were utterly valueless, and then of course repenting too late! Nothing of all this, however, transpired; and Ruth, thankful to be spared all further allusion to Mr. Allonby, did her best to conceal the weariness and anxiety which oppressed her, and tried to throw herself heartily into her sister's amusements, as well as into Colonel Kennedy's interests.

She saw a good deal of Mrs. Powys, to whom her companionship was a real boon, and whom she cordially liked, in spite of something of weakness, both of nerves and understanding, which a little lessened the great attraction of her warmth of heart and graceful manners. Ruth could not help being

rather amused by the almost child-like obedience with which Mrs. Powys complied with what had evidently been her son's request before leaving her; for, while she talked a great deal about all the past years, and dwelt with a grateful, loving appreciation on his patience and courage under difficulties, and his unwearied devotion to herself, she never once spoke of the Throstlethwaite agency and her disappointment about it, or of the future in any way.

The days passed on, and Ruth felt that answers must soon come to her letters. She had calculated that they would be received on the Saturday, or possibly the Sunday, after she wrote, and therefore she had addressed both to Throstlethwaite.

In the middle of the week the answers came; one from Mrs. L'Estrange, and one from Leonard, and they were put into her hands just as she was leaving the house in

the afternoon, to go with Agatha to hear the band play in the gardens.

“Oh, don’t dawdle, Ruth,” Agatha said, as her sister seemed inclined to turn back and go in again. “Never mind your letters for a minute. Bring them with you, and read them in the garden. If we go up too late, it is so troublesome to find chairs.”

It was almost a relief for the moment not to be able to open them, and Ruth complied with the request. They went out and joined a group of friends, and Agatha, being thus provided with amusement, Ruth drew her chair a little apart from the circle of gossiping, lace-making ladies, and, keeping her sunshade between them and herself, ventured to open and read her letters. With a perhaps natural cowardice, she took Mrs. L’Estrange’s first. It was short, and written in haste, thanking her warmly for her information about Mr. Powys, upon

which Mrs. L'Estrange said she had at once acted.

"I have telegraphed to him that I have heard from you, and that I hope he will come down at once and see me and the place, after which we can mutually judge what we wish to do. ' Of course, I shall pay all his expenses, and we are neither of us pledged to anything, but from what you say I am very sanguine. Leonard and Mr. Hillyer seem to have been equally hazy and unbusiness-like in their hasty assumption of his having gone to America, but L. is very sorry for his share in the mistake, whatever it was, and there is no use in making much of it now. An answer just come from Mr. Powys. He will be here the day after to-morrow. I will write to you when his visit is over."

A sentence or two of local news completed

the letter, and Ruth, in bewildered dismay, turned to Leonard's, to read his explanation.

“MY DEAR RUTH,

“You seem so anxious to know that you have done no harm, that I will not lose another post in telling you that it is all right; and as it has turned out, I am very glad indeed that you were Quixotic enough to risk the possible consequences of such a step. You do me only justice in supposing that I have been thoroughly vexed with myself ever since, for my folly that time in London. It was folly to go near such a place at all, and worse folly still to lose my head and play rashly and so double my debts, instead of, as I had hoped, winning enough to pay off that Homburg fellow at once. I had to borrow to pay what I lost that evening, and only got it so easily because I was supposed sure of Throstlethwaite — as I knew well

enough. I don't suppose you can conceive the state of mind I was in altogether, that night. I felt myself to be absolutely in Mr. Powys's power, if I were to let him come down, but I saw that he did not know anything about me then, and, in the half-mad state I was in, I wrote off at once to Aunt Margaret such a letter as I knew would keep him out of my way. Of course, I don't defend it for a moment ; but I was past thinking coolly at the time, and the letter once posted could not possibly be recalled, so there was nothing for it but sticking to it.

"It *was* an awfully strong temptation—for my hopes of Throstlethwaite seemed to hang by a thread—and to lose it meant to lose everything most precious to me. It was indefensible—I admit it—and it was also utterly unnecessary. If I had been in full possession of my senses, I might have known that, for his own sake, Powys was sure to hold his

tongue. To have it known that he had been involved in a gambling row, would not have advanced his interests any more than mine. I have regretted scores of times that I did not go to him quietly before writing to Aunt Margaret at all—for we could have settled the matter comfortably in a few words, since our interests were identical ; but I was unnerved by the whole thing, and acted like an idiot.

“ I am all the more glad that your meeting him now enables us to get it set straight quietly, because if he had not detected the fellow who cheated, I should have been a much heavier loser than I was. As for raking up all the details now, and making wholly uncalled-for confessions to Aunt Margaret—as your ignorance of the world makes you suggest—it would be simply absurd. It is very lucky that you trusted it all to me, for it is far better both for Powys and myself that she should know nothing about it. Elderly ladies of large

property are not given to approving of their agents frequenting gambling clubs, any more than their heirs, — and ‘ Much ado about nothing ’ is a very general feminine motto on these occasions,—for after all, an accidental visit never likely to be repeated was no such heinous offence in either of us, though it would doubtless be thought so.

“ I shall never play again—of that you may be quite sure. I had a very sufficient warning. I have accepted full blame for careless muddling of Hillyer’s report of Powys’ engagements — and Aunt M. has duly held forth on the evils of inaccuracy in business—and all is smooth. She has telegraphed to Powys to come down to see her, and I have written him a note which he will receive before he comes. It will put everything straight between us, and make it all quite plain sailing for him. So you see your conscience, however sensitive, may be quite easy

about the whole concern—full justice is done to him—and *we* take no harm, while Aunt M. is spared all bother and annoyance.

“For your readiness to face trouble and poverty and all sorts of horrors for me and with me, I can never thank you enough—you know what such assurances are to me—though you have always so stringently forbidden me to dwell upon it or to speak out all my love for you until my time of trial is over, that I dare not say much. Things are going splendidly for us, so far; and though this has been an awfully close shave, still ‘all’s well that ends well,’ and now there is nothing to fear. In a much shorter time than either of us thought possible that day on Friar’s Fell, I hope everything will be happily settled, and that I shall be able to claim you openly.

“Ever yours,

“L. B.”

Ruth had believed herself to be prepared for Leonard's answer to her letter, whatever it might be. She had sometimes feared that he would be angry and bitter and vehemently reproachful—more often she had fancied him quite overpowered by all the pain and shame of such a discovery, but even while suffering acutely, trying generously to show that he did not resent her interference.

She had thought of all the forms that regret and mortification and disappointment might possibly take, and would have been as ready to be patient under unreasonable anger, if necessary, as to cheer and console him in all the misery of self-abasement, or to encourage him to bear the consequences of confession with courage and dignity and a resolution to rise above them—but *this* way of treating the matter took her quite by surprise. She felt utterly bewildered and almost inclined to think that she must have

been dreaming and allowing her imagination to magnify and distort the real facts of the case, if it could be possible for him to answer her so lightly.

His cool assumption of masculine superiority of judgment in the matter, his easy ridicule of her "sensitive conscience," his insinuation that women always made "much ado about nothing," and his apparently unhesitating decision that silence as to the past was the only right course now, made her wonder for the moment whether she had indeed been utterly mistaken in the view she had taken of the affair.

Leonard's conduct had seemed to her untruthful and dishonest, cowardly and selfish, so absolutely unworthy of any man of honour that it had been almost more than she could bear to have to tell him that it was known to her—and now he answered lightly—speaking of it all as "folly"—owning merely that

he had "acted like an idiot"—and treating the idea of "a wholly uncalled for confession" as if it could only have occurred to an ignorant, inexperienced girl to suggest anything so ridiculous !

It had been a "close shave" but the danger was past and his spirits could rise at once in the anticipation of the future. Could it possibly have been so if the facts were really what she had been led to believe them ? There surely must have been something very different—in writing to him she had not entered into the details of the story—she had assumed his knowledge of what had become known to her—some explanation *must* be possible which would place it all in a different light, or he could never have answered her in this way !

Then there came back upon her mind every word Mr. Powys had spoken and every look and tone—and the more she

thought of it all, the less possibility of disbelief could she see. Her cheeks burned again at the recollection of the contempt for Leonard which he would not express but could not conceal. She could not but see that Leonard himself admitted all the facts to be the same, that he acknowledged himself to have been influenced by the same motives as those imputed to him ; and she realised slowly but certainly that the only difference was in the feelings with which he regarded it all.

He could write with careless levity of what had cost her hours of shame and pain, and more bitter tears than any she had ever shed. The full confession which would have seemed to her the only hope of recovering peace of mind and self-respect, was in his eyes "simply absurd." He had staved off the necessity for it by a further fencing with truth, and then reconciled it to his conscience by de

claring it to be as much for Mr. Powys's advantage as his own.

With thoughts like these haunting her mind and chilling her heart, Ruth hated the bustle and publicity of watering-place life, and longed for the power of seeking solitude by the shore of Brideswater or on the slopes of Friar's Fell. All through that afternoon and evening she endured the crowd and noise and forced herself to talk and laugh with their many friends, wondering vaguely whether their ready smiles and lively words concealed such aching misery as hers. Gay society was torture, but when night at last brought solitude it was scarcely more endurable.

As far as the present was concerned, she could do nothing more ; she felt that she had done her part, and that she was not called upon to interfere further. The injustice done to Mr. Powys was as effectually cancelled as

if Leonard had told his aunt all the truth ; and his services were secured to her, as Frank had wished.

As far as the actual facts went, nothing would be left to be desired ; it would all be exactly the same as if Leonard had done what she wished and hoped. And yet how different ! Even if this day's letters had told her that Mrs. L'Estrange had withdrawn all hopes of Leonard's ever succeeding to Throstlethwaite, Ruth felt that she should have been comparatively happy, and without any wish to retract the promise which she had made of standing by him *whatever* the consequences of his confession. The generous impulse which had made her associate herself to a certain extent in his disgrace by telling him that she had felt the same temptation, and assure him that they "need not fear poverty *together*," would then never have been regretted. Their life might not have

been quite the ideal life of her previous dreams, but she would have thrown herself into it with all the courage and energy and unselfish warmth of her nature, and would have been ready to help him to struggle upwards and onwards in whatever line he had chosen.

Now, the future seemed very dark to her, and she found it hard either to understand herself or to make up her mind what to do. Had her love for Leonard been only the ordinary "falling in love" of a girl with some pleasant acquaintance in the course of a few weeks, it would now at once have ceased to be—not without pain, but without doubt—and she would have ended the engagement promptly and unhesitatingly.

But in this case, quite apart from all more recent feelings, there was the strong affection which had begun almost in their infancy, and *would* make itself heard. Ever since

she could remember, every thought and pleasure had been associated with Leonard ; all the amusements of her childhood and girlhood had been enhanced by being shared with him ; in all the delightful enjoyments of conscious growth of mind and expanding interests, his sympathy and help and approbation had been unfailing, or had seemed so to her, for she had never discovered until now that she had always given infinitely more than she had received. The very pain she felt now, seemed only to make her more clearly aware of how dear he had always been to her ; and she could not make up her mind to estrange herself from him completely, while yet she realized that all her happiness in looking forward to a life to be spent with him was gone from her. It was useless to dwell upon it, she knew ; but she could think of nothing else, although there was nothing

to be done but to wait and see what course it would be right to take.

She quickly decided not to write to him again now, for that would only involve her in a correspondence as fruitless as it would be painful. She must wait till she was at home again, and meanwhile bear it all as best she might. She should be better able to judge of how it must end after she had seen and spoken to him. And when the morning came after a sleepless night, this was the only result of all the long hours of misery and thought.

The next day's post brought her a note from Mr. Powys—almost as short as a note could be. He thanked her for writing to him, and for having acted on his behalf. He said that he was just starting for Throstlethwaite, and added that he had had a note from Mr. Barrington, making it quite clear how it was all to be arranged, so that there would be

no difficulty on that score—and that was all.

Ruth longed to know how Leonard had written—what he had said. Nothing was to be gathered from the concise reticence of Mr. Powys's style; yet Ruth fancied that she read in it the same cold disdain of Leonard's conduct as had been shown by his way of speaking of him—and there was a sharp sting in the thought.

Two days more passed, and then came a letter from Mrs. L'Estrange, with a full report of Mr. Powys's visit. She spoke highly of him and seemed quite convinced that he was the man she wanted, though she added—

“It remains to be seen how we shall work together, for we both have strong opinions and strong wills, I think, and a tendency to speak out pretty plainly. I fancy, however, that we are both rational enough to

agree to differ amicably, if we differ at all. He is gone back to Devonshire now, to make arrangements for letting his farm as soon as possible, and giving up his various bits of work there, while I put Kester's Hill Manor House into as habitable a condition as I can at present for him and his mother. He makes no difficulties about going there—'likes it, I think—and is so frank and *direct* about business of all kinds that I feel sure he will do his part well.

"I know you will be glad to hear that hitherto Leonard has been helping me most efficiently in many ways. I have every reason, so far, to be entirely content with him; and when Mr. Powys's arrival releases him from his work for me, he will have fairly earned a payment which will make a considerable difference to the labour before him. He has consulted me about his scheme of making money by writing (which he says he

spoke of to you), and I think it may answer well enough. As a rule, I do not approve of young people with nothing of any real worth to say, but with a mere knack of stringing tolerably effective sentences together, swamp-
ing the world with second-hand ideas and second-rate literary work ; but in this case L. is justified in making money in any honest way open to him, and I think he may produce—not anything really original or good, but something very fairly saleable. At any rate, I can help him by getting him an introduction to one or two editors which will ensure him a trial—and under the circumstances, we must wish him success. I believe I am nearly as anxious for the time to be over as he is himself!"

Ruth understood this perfectly ; but, whereas a few days ago it would have given her intense pleasure, it now oppressed .
her painfully.

Hitherto she had said nothing about Mr. Powys to any one, but now she thought it necessary to speak of his going to Throstlethwaite, and she told the facts slightly to Agatha at breakfast, carefully avoiding any details that could excite her suspicion of there being anything odd about the matter. She felt a wish to say a little more to Colonel Kennedy, for she knew that she could trust him to ask no more than she voluntarily told him, and never to allude to it again. He had helped her so readily, and had been so kindly silent, that he seemed to have almost a right to something of an explanation. She went to him when he was as usual sitting over his books during the morning.

"Nigel!" she said. "Half confidences are stupid, worthless things, generally, but I should rather like *you* to know something about all this. There is nothing in either of these letters which I may not show you, if

you don't mind reading them, but you will easily understand that I cannot fill up the gaps."

She gave him Mr. Powys' note and Mrs. L'Estrange's first letter as she spoke, adding :

"The result of his going to Throstlethwaite you heard this morning."

Colonel Kennedy read the letters and returned them to her.

"Then as far as the external world is concerned," he said, "the threatened storm has blown over, and leaves no traces?"

"Exactly," was all Ruth's reply.

"And for that I care very little," Colonel Kennedy continued. "Probably it is best as it is. You cannot fill up the gaps as you say, Ruth, and I have no wish that you should; but of course I can guess the sort of thing that has been trying you so sharply during these last few days, sufficiently to have

a strong opinion about it. After this moment we will never allude to it again, but I must say one thing to you. Let your judgment and conscience have fair play in the matter, unwarped by any sentimental theories of unselfish, self-sacrificing devotion, and indulge in no misguided hopes of ever doing good by well meant folly of that kind. Your first duty is to make the real best of yourself; and if you think that precept sounds hard and cold, console yourself by the thought that the idea of ever making a better job of another life by making a bad one of your own, is of all fallacies the most hopelessly foolish. Don't make an irretrievable false step if you can help it, Ruth. There are few things that I should be more sorry for."

He took up his book again as a sign that he expected no answer, but before she left him Ruth said through her tears :

"I know you are right in theory, but only

time can show me what I really ought to do."

The fact of Mr. Powys becoming Mrs. L'Estrange's agent was not especially interesting to Agatha, and not at all so to any of their acquaintance in Homburg, so that after these few words from Colonel Kennedy Ruth was spared all allusion to the subject, except from Mrs. Powys, who having at length heard from Stephen, was naturally full of it. She was, however, quite unconscious of any complications, and thought of it entirely as it concerned her son, so that it was not difficult to talk to her about it.

She showed Ruth Stephen's letter, written from Throstlethwaite. It was interesting to her to see it, and when she had read it she felt that she liked it. He described the place and people rather fully and decidedly well, showing a real appreciation of Mrs. L'Estrange, and a readiness to interest him-

self in all that would henceforward form part of his work. He entered into all the details of salary and house, and explained what he proposed to do on his return home, so as to effect the move while his mother was in Germany and away from the fuss and fatigue. Of Leonard there was no mention whatever.

"It makes me almost childishly happy," said Mrs. Powys, as Ruth returned the letter to her.

"You are really not afraid of the uprooting and the change to our north country?" said Ruth with a smile. "I should have thought you would have expected to feel yourself banished from civilised regions."

"I am not so silly," replied Mrs. Powys; "but I should mind *nothing* for the sake of seeing Stephen more prosperous. This is such a capital opening for him in every way. It has been intolerable to me lately to think

of him at his present age, after years of hard work of the dullest kind, still exactly where he was when he began, and without any apparent prospect of ever doing more than waste his life in just earning our daily bread. Ever since I realised it, it has been a constant grief to me. It will all be better now. But still those seven wasted years will haunt me as long as I live."

"They need not," exclaimed Ruth with sudden vehemence. "Dear Mrs. Powys, what *does* it matter how poor people are, or how hard they work, or what sort of work it is their fate to have to do, so long as they do it nobly and well? It isn't their place in life, but what they make of it—what they are themselves—that is everything to those who love them."

Mrs. Powys looked a little surprised.

"True, and I would not have Stephen himself changed for any prosperity that could

come to him ; but it is equally impossible not to wish for every sort of good fortune for any one you love, and not to regret that they should have to labour drearily at tasks unworthy of them."

Ruth's excitement had vanished again, and she answered lightly :

" Nevertheless, farmers and gardeners all tell one that trees need frost and snow and many adversities to lighten the soil for their roots, and harden the wood ; and so perhaps bad luck is not always a misfortune for human trees, in the long run."

Mrs. Powys smiled.

" I shall have the last word to that, Miss Charteris. They need sunshine afterwards, at any rate, to bring them to perfection and to ripen their fruit. And so let me rejoice in its coming to my boy at last. He will be all the better now for as much of it as may fall in his way."

In this Ruth acquiesced, and their further conversations on the subject were limited chiefly to facts about Throstlethwaite and Kester's Hill.

The Kennedys were to remain less than a week more at Homburg, and no further news came before they left it. Ruth was heartily glad to leave a place where she had suffered so much, and though she had little hope of real enjoyment now, even in Alpine regions, she determined to do her best to be cheerful and happy.

CHAPTER VIII.

STEPHEN POWYS's thoughts during his rapid journey to England, were naturally a good deal occupied with all that had just passed at Homburg. He made up his mind at once that as far as he was concerned nothing more would come of the affair. It would have been open to him, of course, to write to Mrs. L'Estrange himself, but it was not the sort of thing which he felt any inclination to do ; and having now left the matter entirely in Miss Charteris's hands, it never occurred to him to expect to hear of it again. This fellow, Barrington, was evidently her lover,

and no one in their senses could suppose that she would now voluntarily betray him, and in doing so ruin all his prospects. He was sorry for her, and in his own mind bestowed sundry hard and uncomplimentary epithets on Leonard, feeling with indignant irritation that let his future position be ever so brilliant he could be no suitable husband for such a girl as she was.

It was intensely disagreeable to him to have been, even unintentionally, the means of giving her such pain as he had read in her eyes and voice while they talked by the Stahl Brunnen ; and though for himself the result was certainly a disappointment, he felt that it would have been "simply brutal" to have insisted on making the matter known to Mrs. L'Estrange.

An increase of income and more interesting work would have been dearly purchased at the cost of inflicting such pain and humili-

liation upon Miss Charteris as he must have done had he decided on speaking out. Perhaps after all it was best as it was. He had already a dim consciousness that the less he saw of her the better for his own peace. Even the faintest shadow of such a fancy on his own account was, he knew, the wildest absurdity, but he could not therefore reconcile himself to the thought of her throwing herself away upon a "false, mean sneak" like Leonard Barrington.

Stephen reached home late on Saturday evening, and once there, was far too busy to waste any more time on such profitless dreams. There was no Sunday post at his out-of-the-way farm-house; and on Monday morning he was up and out hours before the arrival of the postman.

He was absent from home all day attending to his work at the stone quarries which he managed, and to various other matters at

some distance; consequently when he came in at night, he found waiting for him among other things both Ruth's letter and Mrs. L'Estrange's telegram.

The telegram said :

"Miss Charteris has sent your address. Can you come down at once to see me? I will pay all expenses."

"Then she *has* written!" was Stephen's first thought. "How uncommonly plucky of her!"

He opened with rather eager curiosity the letter with the Homburg post-mark which lay on the table. The hand-writing was not his mother's; therefore of course it was from Miss Charteris, and would explain what she had done.

"DEAR MR. POWYS,

"I have thought over what you said this morning, and I fully appreciate the generous offer you made of letting it all pass

in silence—but I cannot take advantage of it. For the sake of everyone concerned in the matter, I am sure it is best that the whole truth should be told to Mrs. L'Estrange. You will probably hear from her soon, as I have written to her to tell her of my meeting you and to give her your address. Beyond this I have said nothing—but have referred her to Mr. Barrington for all explanation. I should wish if possible that she should never know that I have had anything to do with it. It had better be supposed to rest between you and Mr. Barrington and herself. To *him* I have written fully—as I am sure you will soon hear from himself. I hope that all may soon be settled now.

“Yours truly,

“RUTH CHARTERIS.”

Stephen read this note through twice. With the help of the recollection of Ruth's

face as it had haunted him ever since he had turned away and left her under the acacia trees, it was not difficult to him to read "between the lines;" and as his imagination gradually realised with very tolerable accuracy all the phases of feeling through which she must have passed before she could have forced herself to act as she had done, his heart was filled with a degree of admiration and compassion for her which, if his mother could have seen it, would have terribly alarmed her for his future peace of mind. She would almost have regretted that there should again apparently be a chance of his going to Throstlethwaite.

Since the time when his father's ruin had so completely altered all his prospects, Stephen had really been almost entirely banished from what is usually called "society." He had mixed in it only at long intervals and for very short periods,

and it had ceased to form any important part of his life. He had not missed it much after the first few months, and an occasional visit from or to an old college or school friend, had been relaxation enough for him. He had full and varied occupation—hard work both for mind and body—and he had naturally perfect health and very good spirits, so that he had neither leisure nor inclination to dwell upon grievances. The energetic activity and cheerful self-reliance which in unbroken prosperity might have had a tendency to make him somewhat overbearing and dictatorial, had been turned to their full use in struggling against difficulties, and he had accepted the life which was thus assigned to him without the slightest wish to grumble at its conditions.

Those seven years had been neither unhappily nor unprofitably spent, and whether the quick, unquestioning decision with which

he had originally adopted the life as a necessity had been an error of judgment or not, its consequences had done him no harm. Had the same circumstances arisen now, he would probably have met them differently; for his view of them as a youth of two and twenty had varied considerably from that which his calmer judgment and more matured experience would have led him to take seven years later; but he had done what he had thought right at the time, after deliberately counting the cost, and he had never regretted it. Looking back indeed was not much in his way; he had always found it enough to deal with the present. His life had been busy and active, yet with leisure both for books and thought, and he had enjoyed it.

It was only lately that he had begun to wish for a larger sphere, and for more society of his own kind; and that wish had developed itself much more strongly after his

day on Brideswater in the spring. To say that he had then fallen in love with Ruth Charteris, would be to say too much, but her beauty and grace and spirit, her frank, gracious pleasantness and her unaffected cordiality had made a great impression on him.

He had seemed suddenly to become aware that his present mode of life could lead to no future ; and he had felt that as his mother's health would now allow of it, he must try for something which would enable him to rise a little in the world, and so make marriage at some future time possible. That meeting with Ruth had certainly suggested these vague dreams, and the visionary wife who thenceforth held her place in them always a good deal resembled her ; but that perhaps was only natural, since his acquaintance among young ladies was very limited.

None of those whom he had casually met when he had visited relations or friends during the past seven years had interested him in the least; and the romance of his life, so far, was still confined to the recollection of one or two violent attachments in his school days, as serious to him then as they now seemed grotesque! He had felt absurdly disappointed in the spring, when nothing had come of Mrs. L'Estrange's enquiries about him; and though he was never inclined to dwell upon the gloomy side of anything, he had been more restless since, more anxious to find some way back into the wider channels of the world. His second meeting with Ruth, at Homburg, had stirred all this freshly, and the first renewal of hope that the failure of the negotiation had arisen only from a mistake, and that the opening which had so many attractions was to be

offered to him again, had been exceedingly pleasant to him.

All that then followed so rapidly had left him little time to think, and his firm refusal to have anything to do with revealing Leonard Barrington's conduct to Mrs. L'Estrange had been dictated simply by instinctive consideration for Ruth ; but his judgment afterwards had quite acquiesced in his first hasty decision, and he had returned home fully convinced that it would have been impossible to have acted differently, and that there was nothing to be done but to forget it all.

This telegram and letter now unsettled everything again, and his thoughts were very busy during his solitary evening. He had always believed (though certainly without any particular grounds for doing so) that a woman was sure to be guided by her feelings, and that affection was usually her

strongest motive for action ; he had assumed, as a matter of course, that with any warm-hearted girl everything else would go to the wall if it clashed with the fortunes of a lover ; and, judging the question without much thought and from the man's point of view, he might have said that it was all right that it should be so.

He perceived, however, that in this case Miss Charteris had voluntarily sacrificed her feelings to her sense of honour and justice and her love of truth, and with this increased appreciation of her character there came to him so vivid a perception of all the torture which his revelations must have caused, that he almost wished that he had never seen her.

He had learned from herself that Leonard Barrington had been adopted many years ago by the L'Estranges, and therefore it followed that she had known him intimately

from her childhood. That childish friendship had grown into a stronger feeling, that in fact she loved him, had been clearly shown by her intense anxiety to know the truth of all this, by her eager defence of him at first with such quick, sensitive changes of colour, and then by the bitter anguish of shame which she had not been able to conceal ; and if she loved him, Stephen could imagine the cost at which her letters must have been written.

His contempt for Leonard was unbounded, and he rather enjoyed the thought of his sensations on receiving the letter which Ruth said that she had written to him ; for if anything *could* make a fellow like that feel small, surely such a letter from the girl whom he loved must have the power to do it !

He wondered what would be the end of it all. Probably he should never know, for it was not likely that he should ever again be thrown in the way of all these people,

although it had happened to him now to have it in his power materially to influence their fortunes. He had voluntarily resigned his right to a voice in the matter ; but now, once more, an opportunity was offered to him of letting his life drift into the same current as theirs.

His mind thus came gradually to the question of his own reply to Mrs. L'Estrange. It admitted of little doubt. His presence among them would be painful to every one after all this—every one meaning chiefly Ruth Charteris—and he had better quietly decline to go. Mrs. L'Estrange might offer him the agency from a sense of justice, but she could not really wish him to take it ; and he felt, with some sharp regret, that Miss Charteris must always henceforward shrink from seeing him.

It was too late to send either letter or telegram that night ; but, being always prompt

to act, he wrote a letter to Mrs. L'Estrange, thanking her for sending for him, but saying that he felt sure she would agree with him in thinking that under the circumstances it was better for him not to come among them, and that he gratefully but decidedly declined to do so.

It was a sacrifice, but he was satisfied to make it.

"It will save *her* some of the trouble ahead, anyhow," he thought; "so it's worth doing."

And then he wrote a note to Ruth to the same effect as that to Mrs. L'Estrange. These still lay on his writing-table waiting to be posted, when the next morning brought him another letter on the same subject.

"DEAR MR. POWYS,

"I am sorry to find from the letters we have just received from Homburg, that my misapprehension of your friend Mr.

Hillyer's information with regard to your engagements in America, has nearly been the cause of depriving my aunt Mrs. L'Estrange of the chance of securing your services as her agent. I am glad, however, that it proves to be not yet too late, and that my careless blunder will have no permanent ill effects. I have told her that I have no doubt that the error was entirely mine, and not Mr. Hillyer's; but as the matter is now fully explained and entirely set right, there is little use in dwelling upon this.

"You will, I hope, send a favourable answer to her telegram; and I trust all will soon be satisfactorily settled with her. I can safely assure you that you will find the position a pleasant one. With regard to the one occasion on which it seems that we met in town (though without knowing that we were destined to see more of each other in the future), I am quite sure that your ex-

perience of the world will make you agree with me that it is best withheld from Mrs. L'Estrange's knowledge. Wise and kind and liberal-minded as she is, she is not without some strong prejudices, and it would be impossible in this case to make her see the thing in its true insignificance. It would cause her only anxiety and annoyance, needless no doubt, but none the less trying to her; and I have no hesitation in deciding, since the decision has wisely been left to me, that it will be best for us all that we meet as strangers. Only one explanation of our mutually agreeing to do so will be necessary, and that I will make at once. When you come down to Throstlethwaite, I hope I shall have many opportunities of proving myself not ungrateful for the service you rendered me that evening.

"Yours faithfully,

"LEONARD BARRINGTON."

Leonard had not written this letter without some sense of shame ; but having made up his mind that his aunt must not know the truth, he felt that it was the only thing to be done. He was instinctively sure that Stephen Powys was to be trusted to take one of two courses. He might stay away rather than come, down on these terms—or he might agree to them and come—but in either case he would be silent, and that was really all that mattered.

Stephen read this letter with amazement and contempt. His first impulse was to send off all the same the two letters he had written over-night ; but then he remembered that he had assumed Mrs. L'Estrange's knowledge of all the circumstances, so that could not be done, and he must at any rate write another to her. Finally, he destroyed all three letters—those he had written, as well as the one just received—and made

up his mind to go down at once, and judge for himself as to what it was best to do.

Mysteries were naturally distasteful to him, but in this case it was clearly not his business to tell such of Mr. Barrington's secrets as had come to his knowledge accidentally while he was yet quite unconnected with Mrs. L'Estrange. As the truth was to remain unknown to her anyhow, his presence at Throstlethwaite could not now be painful to her; of course, the sight of him must be odious to Mr. Barrington—but "he seems able to swallow anything," thought Stephen, "and the more bitter the pill the better!"

There remained then only two reasons for declining so advantageous an employment—one being the doubt whether he and Mr. Barrington could ever get on sufficiently well together for the surface harmony necessary for Mrs. L'Estrange's comfort; the other being the question of how far it would be

tolerable to Ruth Charteris to meet him again after all this, and to see him and Mr. Barrington together.

Of the first point he should be able to judge when he had been at Throstlethwaite and seen Mrs. L'Estrange. The second would be less easy to decide; but some light might possibly be thrown even upon that, for at present he did not know whether any absolute engagement existed between them or not. If there were none, surely her affection could not survive all this and there never would be one. In that case—it was prudent to stop there—but the indefinite future hope decided him for the moment. He telegraphed to Mrs. L'Estrange that he would go down immediately, and he wrote the note which Ruth had received from him at Homburg.

He wondered a little as to “the one necessary explanation” which Mr. Barrington had

undertaken to give. Would he shirk it? No—for his own sake of course Miss Charteris must know that the truth was to remain untold—so some explanation he must give—and Stephen did not envy him the task of doing it!

Utterly as he condemned and despised Leonard, he did however recognize that the one sign of grace in the whole wretched business was his careful avoidance of bringing in Miss Charteris' name. From that silence Stephen guessed that he did love her as well as so poor a creature could love any one; but how he could have won her love in return was hopelessly puzzling. No affection that he could ever be capable of giving could be in the least degree worthy of her—such a marriage must make her miserable in the end, and the only thing to hope was that she might recognize this in time, and have courage to free herself while it was possible.

That the letter which she had probably by this time received from Mr. Barrington would give her even deeper pain than she had felt before, Stephen did not doubt; for to know that he had yielded once to what might certainly have been a strong temptation to a weak, self-seeking nature, was (though humiliating enough) nothing, in comparison to the thorough lowness of tone and utter want of moral courage shown by this cool, deliberate persistence in deception. Surely after all this his power over her would be gone!

With his head full of thoughts of Ruth, Stephen went down to Throstlethwaite; and when he left it at the end of three days, he had finally agreed to return as soon as possible to enter upon his new duties.

He liked Mrs. L'Estrange extremely; he felt that he could work with her to their mutual satisfaction; and the prospect of

managing a property so important, and so capable of improvement, was delightful to him, while the condition of living at Kester's Hill was in no way repugnant to him. A little trouble would make the old Manor House a very pleasant home for his mother, and the liberal salary which Mrs. L'Estrange offered would more than double the income he had ever been able to make hitherto by all his various undertakings put together. There would be abundance of work—but he liked work—and there would also be abundance of pleasure. He had no longer any hesitation in accepting the appointment; for he felt that he should be able to fill it well, and that it would suit him in every way.

As far as Leonard Barrington was concerned, he foresaw no serious difficulties; for he soon perceived that, whether he were to be eventually the heir or not, he had not at present any real influence over Mrs. L'Es-

trange. Provided they could meet without difficulty in ordinary social intercourse there would be no trouble, for they would never need to clash in business. Mrs. L'Estrange managed her own affairs in absolute independence ; or if she consulted any one, it was Mr. Charteris.

Leonard came home for one night during Stephen's stay, because Mrs. L'Estrange wished that they should meet ; and Stephen was constrained to admit that he carried it off wonderfully well, contriving to escape an introduction by speaking cordially without waiting for one, and showing himself altogether at his best. Under no circumstances could they have been really congenial companions, and as it was, a mutual dislike was inevitable ; but Stephen saw that it would be easy to maintain peace and outward courtesy, and that therefore Leonard need be no obstacle to his coming.

He ascertained also, somehow, that no recognized engagement with Miss Charteris existed; and that impression once firmly taken, he would not have been easily deterred from accepting a position which would bring him into the same neighbourhood, and throw him frequently into her society. He wished to see how the story was to end.

Everything was quickly settled, and he went back to Devonshire to make the necessary arrangements for letting Mrs. Powys's farm and giving up all his work in the neighbourhood. Fortune, which had neglected him for so long, now favoured him remarkably. He was able at once to find a suitable and acceptable successor to most of his offices, as well as a good tenant for the house and farm, in a young man, the son of a wealthy farmer in that county, who had been working with him for some time as a sort of pupil and deputy. There was therefore as

little delay as was possible in such a case ; and before he went to bring his mother back from Germany, he had completed his negotiations, and had transplanted himself and all their movable belongings to Kester's Hill.

CHAPTER IX.

THE Kennedys took Ruth home to Monks-holme early in October ; but after a very short visit they were to leave it again themselves, taking their children with them. They were not likely to be there again for a considerable time, for they were going first into Scotland to spend a fortnight with Colonel Kennedy's father, and after that it had been arranged that they should once more join households with Sir Everard and spend the winter with him in London, or at any rate as much of it as should pass before Colonel Kennedy had any professional work to take him elsewhere.

The six weeks spent in Switzerland had been on the whole successful; and though Ruth's enjoyment of all she had seen had fallen very far short of the unclouded delight which she would have felt under the same circumstances the previous summer, she had really derived not only benefit but pleasure from the variety. From a sense of what was due to those with whom she travelled, she had from the first done her best to shake off the depression which she could not but feel, and the unselfish effort at self-control had brought its own reward in the gradually returning power of real enjoyment, and in the renewed vigour and freshness with which she was now prepared to meet the troubles inevitably in store for her.

The return home could not fail to bring back, in all its first acuteness, the pain which she had had to bear when at Homburg; but she had gained strength with which to meet

it, and hard as it must be to carry out the resolution she had taken, she did not mean to shrink from it.

None of her brothers were now at home. Bob had gone back to Eton ; Oswald had been with them in Switzerland, instead of coming home for his summer holiday, and was now at work again in London ; while Edgar's "long leave" would not begin till near Christmas. On the whole, though a very affectionate sister, Ruth was glad now to be free from the demands on her time and spirits always made by their presence at home.

The day before the Kennedys were to leave Monksholme was during the morning one of the wildest of wet days among the mountains. All night long the wind had brought sheets of rain dashing fiercely against the windows, and the same thing continued all the forenoon ; but about three o'clock the

rain ceased entirely, the wind became more moderate, and the clouds slowly rose above the hills in solid grey masses.

“Good for a last walk, Ruth?” said Colonel Kennedy, looking into the drawing-room half an hour later. “I think the rain is over for to-day. Shall we go and have a look at the floods?”

Ruth agreed at once, and went to equip herself properly.

A quarter of an hour afterwards she and her brother-in-law, accompanied of course by Quiz and Hector, set out on their walk. Colonel Kennedy suggested going up Friar’s Fell, as likely to be the pleasantest thing they could do, and they therefore went in that direction.

The prospect of a couple of hours’ walk on the mountains in a fresh wind, with a thoroughly congenial companion, was a relief to Ruth, for active exercise in the open air

was at once more invigorating and more soothing to her than anything else ; and with her brother-in-law she could either talk or be silent as she chose.

As yet she had not seen either Mrs. L'Estrange or Leonard or Mr. Powys ; but Mrs. L'Estrange wished to see Colonel Kennedy and wanted also to introduce Mr. Powys to Mr. and Mrs. Charteris, so she had begged that the whole party from Monksholme would dine at Throstlethwaite that evening. No one else was to be there ; but Ruth knew that Leonard was to come home for the night on purpose, and that Mr. Powys, who had brought his mother to Kester's Hill about a week previously, was to come over to dine and sleep.

Let her strive as she might for courage and self-control, Ruth could not help dwelling on the pain and embarrassment which the evening must bring with it. To meet Leonard for the first time must be trying

under any circumstances ; but to meet him thus, in the presence of both Mr. Powys and Colonel Kennedy and in the absolute publicity of so small a party, would be *so* disagreeable that it required all Ruth's courage not to escape the ordeal by staying at home under plea of a headache. She did not intend to do this—she meant to go and bear it all as best she might ; but it was impossible that the anticipation should not oppress her, and though she had endeavoured to appear in her usual spirits, and had been playing merrily with the children to help them through the whole long day indoors, it was a relief to her now to come out for this walk.

To have been quite alone on the mountain side, free to let her thoughts wander as they would, and to draw unconscious inspiration and strength from the wild beauty of such an evening on the fells, would have been per-

haps *the best* in her present mood; but Colonel Kennedy was as little disturbing a companion as any one could be, for though he was ready enough to talk if there were occasion for it, silence was always perfectly acceptable to him, and he and Ruth were by this time on terms of such thorough brother-and-sister friendship and intimacy as to put all need for making conversation out of the question.

They went up through the wood to the lodge, where much to their surprise they found, deep in talk with the game-keeper, Mr. Powys himself. He was holding his horse, from which he had apparently just dismounted. As Ruth and Colonel Kennedy came up, he turned to speak to them. There was a slight hesitation of manner as he greeted Ruth which Colonel Kennedy saw and interpreted rightly—he was uncertain of what his reception might be. Ruth saw it

too, and sharply painful though it was to her to meet him again after all that had passed, her strong sense of justice came to her aid. She was generous as well as just ; she understood at once the doubt which Mr. Powys might easily feel, and determined to show him that she thought he had acted rightly and wisely throughout. She went forward quickly and held out her hand, saying firmly and cordially, though with a varying colour,—

“I am very glad to see you, and to welcome you to our north country.”

Stephen fully appreciated the effort she had made, and his face and voice showed that he did, though he only said, “You are very kind,” and busied himself in responding to the vehement demonstrations of recognition which Quiz was bestowing upon him.

“Quiz is not ungrateful you see,” said

Ruth, glad of something easily superficial to say. "He quite remembers your help that day by the lake; and one could almost believe that he was telling the story to Hector and presenting you to him as a friend!"

As she spoke, Quiz had rushed away from Stephen, and was bounding round his bigger companion, barking furiously with little, short, quick barks of excitement and pleasure; the next thing he did was to return and coil himself at Stephen's feet in a sort of vibrating ball before again jumping up against him; after which he once more dashed off to Hector. It was impossible not to laugh, and not to watch their proceedings. Hector first inspected Stephen with great dignity, and assumed an air of grave wisdom as he slowly sniffed round his legs; then as Stephen smiled and stroked his head, he rose on his hind legs and solemnly placing two very

muddy paws on his arm, tried to lick his face.

"Oh! Hector, down!" exclaimed Ruth, laughing. "Don't let him take liberties, Mr. Powys. But Quiz has evidently told him all about it, and he has adopted you as a friend—and Hector's friendships are constant. How does Mrs. Powys get on at Kester's Hill? Our climate has given you rather a rough reception, but I hope she bears it pretty well."

Stephen gave a report of his mother, who was unusually well, and quite happily settled at Kester's Hill. He himself had come over to Throstlethwaite early in the morning, having much to do there, and he was now on his way to Thornbeck to see some people on business. The heavy rains had washed the road very bare, and one of the many loose pebbles about had got into his horse's foot. He had dismounted to take it out,

and the gamekeeper who happened to be near had helped him.

"I must not linger here now," he added, "if I am to be back in good time—and I ought not to keep you from your walk."

"We are going up Friar's Fell," Ruth said. "I think there will be a fine view. We shall see you this evening." And calling her dogs, she crossed the road with Colonel Kennedy and passed through the gate leading to Friar's Fell.

For fully half an hour they walked steadily and in unbroken silence up the gorge between Friar's Fell and Bridesmoor. It was not possible to Ruth to pass the craggy point beneath which she had been sitting that day in the spring when Leonard had joined her, without recalling all that had then been said by them both. Even then he had not been wholly true—the confidence which had won from her the first openly spoken acknow-

ledgment that she looked upon herself as pledged to share his life with all its hopes and fears and difficulties, had been but a half confidence—and yet she believed that he really loved her and she shrank from the thought of the explanation between them which must come.

His last words to her that morning had been —“ Don’t you think, that *between us* we may hope to get to the top of the hill pretty soon ?” The flooded beck that was now rushing down the gorge, seemed to repeat the words mockingly in her ears. She could not and she would not follow him in the path which he had chosen as the one to lead them to the “top of the hill,” and to tell him so was the task that lay before her.

She had always been very susceptible to external influences, and she loved the mountains and streams amongst which she had been brought up, as if they were living friends.

From her childhood she had been accustomed to seek and find both sympathy and counsel from the silent crags and noisy waters—for the thoughts and feelings they suggested to her scarcely seemed her own—and the idea of there being tongues in the trees and brooks, or sermons in stones, was to her no mere poetical fancy, but a priceless reality. To-day, however, nature was in a cheerless mood, and as they walked quickly up the gorge through the young plantations covering Friar's Fell, the steep, rough slope of Bridesmoor rising so close to them on the opposite side, was grand undoubtedly but gloomy and stern, suggestive more of thoughts of difficulty and failure, if it were to represent the "hill of life," than of hope and happiness.

At length they reached the shoulder of the hill at the top of the gorge, and on turning a corner of high rocks, a view of the whole of

Thorndale opened before them. The lake of Thornsmere lay beyond the town of Thornbeck like a sheet of dull, dark lead, the sky almost matching it; the craggy fells surrounding it looked dark and low, and the higher ranges in the back-ground were wrapped in clouds. The full, rushing, muddy river Thorne had overflowed its banks nearly all the way between Thornsmere and Brideswater, and hedges, trees and railings just showed above the water in the flooded fields.

Ruth felt as if it were very like the dreary reality of life, as it appeared to her just now. She looked at the white lines down the mountains, each representing a lively foaming brook dashing merrily on over the rocks only to lose itself in the still, dark, gloomy lake, and they seemed to her to picture fairly enough the hopes and joys of youth, quenched so soon in painful experience of

life, and flowing on afterwards only to swell the muddy river of human sorrows and disappointments. Suddenly she became conscious, as she stood looking down on the view, that Colonel Kennedy was watching her anxiously and gravely. She laughed and began to move on.

"I never saw it look less exhilarating!" she said lightly. "Let us get on to the top, and hope that the other side may be brighter."

Colonel Kennedy now threw away the cigar which he had been smoking during their silent walk, and began to discuss the height of the flood, the force of the water, and a variety of matter-of-fact questions which effectually roused Ruth from her dreams.

A quarter of an hour's walking brought them to the top of the mountain which was a low one, and then they suddenly lost sight of Thornbeck and Thornsmeare, which lay

behind them as they faced westwards and looked down the valley to the foot of Brideswater, and so on to the sea. In the distance over the sea the clouds had cleared quite away, and a streak of clear sky, lovely with all the hues of the coming sunset, looked almost dazzlingly brilliant, while the faint grey outline of the Scotch hills on the opposite coast was clearly visible beyond it. Ruth exclaimed at the beauty of the scene.

"You were making gloomy comparisons just now," said Colonel Kennedy, "drawing dismal analogies between nature and life—were you not? Finish your poem here then, with that sunset. Everything ought to have a happy ending if possible."

"Yes—if possible," acquiesced Ruth with a smile, "but it can't always be possible!"

"Not if we make up our minds to accept one ending and no other as a happy one.

But I think, Ruth, *you* are reasonable enough to admit that the fate which people fix upon for themselves as the one most to be desired, would often be by no means the best for them really, and that in the very failure of their most cherished hopes they ultimately find their best happiness. In fact, I think a general smash of early castles in the air is often the best thing that can happen. It clears the ground for more rational erections, even though it may leave an ugly blank for a time."

"But things don't happen in that complete way," said Ruth. "It would be easier if they did. If your castle doesn't smash—but totters—you must have the difficulty of deciding for yourself what the end is to be."

"Of choosing between completing its ruin and making believe that it stands firm—when you know that it does not?" replied

Colonel Kennedy. "Not much choice there, Ruth, I think. One hears a great deal of moralizing about 'neglected opportunities' and 'wasted chances' and so on, but it seems to me that the turning points in most people's lives are their mistakes. We all make them. Sometimes we don't discover that they *are* mistakes till too late to do more than make the best of their consequences—or the worst—but very often the false step *is* seen in time to be retrieved if there is moral courage to do it—only there is not—and for want of it a whole life is spoiled."

They had left the top of the hill now, and were walking quickly homewards. Ruth perfectly understood what Colonel Kennedy meant, but it was not easy to answer him and there was rather a long silence, broken at last by a remark from him on some commonplace topic, made merely to show her that he

had no intention of trying to force her confidence.

She answered him, and then again they were silent until they had left the hill and were in the wood between the lodge and the house. Then, in the fading light under the dark Scotch firs, Ruth suddenly spoke.

"Nigel! I don't want to pretend not to understand what you said just now up on Friar's Fell. I know you have seen enough to guess pretty well what has been making this summer rather hard to get through—and it is kind of you to care. I know you would help me if you could—but there are some things in which nobody can help one—directly. Indirectly you *have* helped me all these past weeks more than I can tell you—only I can't talk about it."

There was so much feeling in her voice as she spoke, that Colonel Kennedy was a good deal touched by it, though he only showed

it by speaking rather more abruptly than usual.

"Talking generally does more harm than good—and I know well enough that we must all live our own lives, Ruth—but one can't help seeing the under current of other people's sometimes, and wishing to help."

"And if I thought that any one could help me, it would be to you that I should come, Nigel; but as it is, I must do the best I can by myself. I could not tell you facts that concern other people, and what would be the good of asking advice in that case? Besides I don't think, really, it is often advice that one wants in things of this kind—it is not so difficult to know what one ought to do as to find courage to do it—and *that* you have helped me to find—in a hundred ways—and I want you to know that I feel it—that I am not ungrateful for all you have been to me this summer."

"Poor child!" Colonel Kennedy said almost involuntarily, "it has been a hard time for you, and I fear the pain is not over yet. Don't be afraid," he added, as she turned away with a sudden shiver, "I am not going to talk about it much now, and I will never even allude to it again—but I have been very anxious for you, Ruth, I admit—afraid lest you should not be brave in time. Now, I am satisfied. I am sorry for what still lies before you, but I am much more glad to know, as I do know now, that you will not make the fatal mistake of joining your life to one that would only drag you down. It is bad enough for a man when he finds out that he has done it—but for a woman it is infinitely worse. With her more limited independence and quicker sensitiveness she must either sink, herself, to the lower level, or be utterly wretched."

"The last in any case," Ruth exclaimed

quickly, "but better that only, than both!"

"I told you, up there, to take a good look at that second view and to finish off your fancies after its fashion!" said Colonel Kennedy in the half earnest, half jesting tone he often used. "You will find yourself some day I hope in a calm, deep sea under a clear sky, and will know how to value real happiness all the better for having, like your friends the brooks, passed first through those gloomy leaden lakes and all the turmoil of that muddy flooded river."

"Oh! Nigel! How could you guess what I was thinking up there?" she exclaimed in surprise.

"Your eyes betrayed you," he answered, "and the idea was rather obvious. Now, you have not more than time to go in and rest and dress. I will put up the dogs."

He turned off towards the offices as he spoke and left her alone.

When the party from Monksholme entered the drawing-room at Throstlethwaite that evening, Mrs. L'Estrange and Mr. Powys were there alone. Leonard's train had been a little late and he had not yet come down from dressing. There were greetings and introductions, and Ruth hoped that the agitation which was making her alternately hot and cold, would pass unobserved, for she was standing near the fire in rather a quiet corner, and the room was not much lighted. She was answering a question from Mr. Powys about her walk that afternoon, when suddenly, almost in the middle of her sentence, he turned away from her and walked to the other side of the room.

Then she saw that Leonard had come in, that he was speaking to her mother and Agatha, and must come to her in another

moment. Even at the time she recognized the consideration which prompted Mr. Powys to move away out of sight and hearing of their first meeting.

The hand she gave to Leonard was icy cold, and though his look and touch brought the colour to her face—for he was standing between her and the rest of the party, and ventured on making both significant—the eyes which met his were grave and troubled.

“She means to worry,” he thought rather impatiently, but he had to turn away the next moment to take Mrs. Charteris to dinner.

The table was round and the conversation was general, which spared Ruth from being obliged to take much part in it. She was placed between Leonard and Mr. Powys, but she said very little to either, for she could not be easy and unconstrained. Her mind was very busy. She saw that Leonard had

evidently risen in his aunt's favour since she herself had left home four months ago, for her manner to him was kind and motherly, and he was evidently more at ease with her than he had been formerly.

He looked well and cheerful, and except for a moment's awkward consciousness on first meeting her, Ruth could detect no sign of shame or regret—no trace of any secret oppression of spirits. Leonard always enjoyed society and appeared to advantage in it, for he had the natural gifts of good looks and pleasing manners, and was perfectly free from all personal conceit or affectation. He could talk pleasantly and well on most of the topics of the day, and this evening he was doing his best to be agreeable; but each light sentence and gay laugh jarred on Ruth's nerves.

Once or twice, when he was left at liberty, he turned to her and showed an evident

anxiety to make her talk to him, but she could not do it. She saw clearly what he intended. He meant to have no discussion of the past—to make no allusion to the letters that had been written—but to assume that all was right now, as much to her satisfaction as to his own, and to treat their secret understanding and engagement as an accepted fact without further explanation.

When the gentlemen came into the drawing-room after dinner Agatha, who was an excellent musician, was at the piano, and under cover of her brilliant music, Leonard after a time went up to Ruth, and leaning quietly against the mantelpiece began to talk to her. She was sitting back in a low chair, rather in the shadow, and as he, in speaking to her, necessarily turned rather away from the others, he felt safe from inconvenient scrutiny.

“I have lots to tell you, Ruth, and nothing

but good news," he began, speaking in the low, monotonous tone which of all others is the safest from being overheard. "I have got on beyond my hopes, and I am pretty sure now that the three years we talked of may be halved."

Ruth murmured something about being "very glad," but she could not look up, and felt as if the words would choke her. She fully perceived now the selfish want of consideration for her which could thus persist in forcing upon her the recollection of her secret promise to him, and she bitterly regretted the weakness which had allowed her ever to drift into such a position as that in which she stood towards him.

Leonard bent lower towards her, and almost whispered :

"One year more from this present time will see me quite free, I really believe—and *then*, Ruth——"

But Ruth did not, as he expected, look up with a blush and a smile which she might intend to be reproving, but which would be scarcely discouraging—she grew very pale and hastily leaving her seat moved to one close to Mrs. L'Estrange, where she was safe from all fear of being disturbed.

Not long afterwards there was a discussion about the plans for the church at Kester's Hill, which had been sent in for Mrs. L'Estrange's approval by various architects. She wished to show them to Colonel Kennedy and Ruth.

"They are all on the table in the library," she said, "and if you don't mind coming there it will be the least trouble to everybody, I think. Will you go before us, Leonard, and light the candles."

The whole party went to the library; the plans were inspected and discussed; and then, after a time, Mrs. L'Estrange said :

"But I must not be deprived of Agatha's promised song. Let us go back to the drawing-room."

Leonard stayed behind the rest for a moment to cover the drawings and extinguish the candles, and was just going to follow them when he became aware that Ruth had not left the room. She was standing by the hearth, where a wood fire was burning. Leonard knew her far too well to think for a moment that she had lingered there for the sort of interview which would have been pleasant enough to him. He knew that she wanted to speak of what it was hateful to him to think of, and he was strongly tempted to pretend not to see her, and to return to the drawing-room, whence Agatha's clear soprano now made itself heard.

He had chosen to act dishonourably for his own interest, he intended to persevere in the untruth, and now that all was going

smoothly he was quite able to enjoy himself and to forget it; but in his heart he *was* ashamed of what he had done, and it was irritating to him to be reminded of what he knew to be degrading to him, and which yet was known not only to Ruth but to Mr. Powys. He would not talk about it—and he turned towards the door.

Those who feel pain the most acutely are often, however, not the least brave in facing it when there is need for doing so, and Ruth had made up her mind to speak. She knew that they must meet again the following evening at a ball at Edenford, given by the bachelors of the county—explanation *there* would certainly be impossible, and the longer she allowed the present state of things to continue without protest, the more difficult it would be to end it.

“Leonard!” she said; and he could not avoid going to her.

It was a wide, old-fashioned hearth, and large logs of wood rested on the dogs above a mass of glowing embers which cast a strange, red light on Ruth's white dress and pale, troubled face.

"I won't keep you a minute——" she began.

Foreseeing a tiresome argument, Leonard quickly determined on what line to take, and interrupted her by an eager, lover-like protest. She checked him at once by a look and gesture which he could not withstand, and went on gently and gravely.

"I have not very much to say, Leonard, but I *must* get it said at once. Listen patiently, and do not be angry with me if you can help it. I did not answer your letter because I thought it better to wait to speak, so that there might be no possibility of any misunderstanding. I don't want to seem to judge your conduct—but it is clear to me, now,

that we see things so differently, that we must not make any more plans for the future together. The sort of secret engagement we *had* made was wrong,—but quite apart from that, it must end now.”

“Oh, Ruth!” he exclaimed reproachfully. “And for such a mere crotchet you would throw me over, when you know all that you are to me, and have been ever since we were children. You *cannot* mean it seriously.”

“It is no crotchet,” Ruth answered sadly, for his look and tone tried her resolution severely. “Leonard! Don’t let us argue. I would have shared poverty and disgrace with you willingly, and would have done my best to help you—but I will have no part, now or ever, in a life of which the prosperity is gained at the cost of truth and honour. It is useless to ask it.”

A sudden deep flush crossed Leonard's face as he retorted,

"Ruth! If you can even think of me in that way, you can never have loved me as I believed you did."

He spoke angrily, and moved one of the large logs impatiently with his foot. It sent up a dazzling shower of sparks and a sudden fitful blaze flashed on Ruth's face and showed him what a painful effort she was making as she answered him with a grave, frank dignity which effectually silenced his petulance.

"Do not let us quarrel, Leonard. It is no question of our feeling for one another. I do not doubt your love for me—it *has been* very precious to me; while if I had not loved *you*, the last few weeks would not have been so hard to live through, and it would not cost me so much to say this now."

"Ruth! it is folly to talk of parting like

this!" Leonard exclaimed vehemently. "You say you do not doubt my passionate love for you—you admit that you love me—then what more is there to be said? Forget the past—it is over—and think only of the future before us. You shall never suffer again because of my shortcomings, so do let yourself be happy, my darling. I cannot bear to see you look as you look now, because of me; or to think of the way you have been tormenting yourself so unnecessarily all this time. Let your conscience rest, and be reasonable. I must have my own bright Ruth again! Surely, dearest, if we love each other—as you own we do—it is enough?"

He had spoken too fast and too earnestly to be stopped before this, but now Ruth drew back from him gently but decidedly, and raised her eyes, so full of suffering that he could not bear to meet them, and turned away.

“Much—but not enough,” she said. “Love without reverence is a lifeless, worthless thing—and mine for you is gone—destroyed by yourself. We have been friends all our lives, Leonard—let us be friends still—but we can never again be more.”

She spoke with perfect self-command, but there was a ring of pain in her voice, which Leonard could not bear. He had never before appreciated her so truly, or admired her so much. He felt the full value of what was being withdrawn from him, and determined that he would not give her up. It might be hard to regain his power over her—but she *had* loved him—she loved him still—and he would win her back at any sacrifice—save one. He could not yield to her in this—but it was only a passing fancy on her part—it must be humoured to a certain extent; but, wisely dealt with, it could not withstand the efforts he would make to re-

cover the ground he had lost. He felt in his heart that she was right, but he would not own it; he hated to recall the past, but he could not risk all his prospects in life by a confession, really purposeless, since the wrong he had done was now righted.

These thoughts passed quickly through his mind in the few moments of silence after Ruth ceased to speak. Then as she began to move away, he suddenly caught both her hands, and spoke with an abrupt passion, which forced her to listen.

"I *will* not accept this rejection as final, Ruth!" he said. "When I think of what we have been to each other all our lives, I refuse to believe that you can cast me off in this way for such a trifle—a mere difference of opinion! That I don't attempt to defend any part of that London business, you know—it is hateful to me to recall it—you cannot

condemn it more severely than I do now. It was a wretched mess from beginning to end—foolish—wrong—idiotic; but it is past now, and I think you are neither just nor reasonable about the present. You ought not to expect me to yield my judgment to yours, on a question which you cannot possibly understand as well as I do. Such points are for men to decide; they are quite out of a woman's province, and no girl can be a judge in such a case. Your harsh judgment now, I must bear as the punishment for the wrong I confess, and I will say no more until I am free and have won my place in the world; but our estrangement cannot, and shall not last, after that. I will prove to you that your love *can* come back to full life, and that one mistake need not leave a lasting blot."

He felt her tremble; he saw the conflict of feeling in her face; his torrent of words

had power to shake her terribly, and he thought he had conquered ; but she drew her hands away from him and answered firmly ;

“We are giving each other useless pain, Leonard. The blot need not be lasting if you choose to efface it ; but as it is, though the affection we have felt for each other may make it very hard to part in this way, it would make a life together intolerable to both of us, when we think so differently.”

She left the room as she spoke.

The rest of the evening was short, and Ruth knew very little of what passed. She forced herself to return to the drawing-room ; but as it was growing late and her father had ordered the carriage, there was sufficient general bustle to do away with much need for exertion, and she escaped notice except

from those of the party whose first thought was to help to screen her from observation.

Colonel Kennedy was grieved that she should suffer, but he was glad that it was over; and Mr. Powys wondered what had been the real state of things between them previously, but rejoiced in the certainty that the interview just over had evidently been a parting.

"You all go to Nethercroft, to-morrow, for the Edenford ball?" said Mrs. L'Estrange, at the last. "When do you come home, Ruth?"

"On Saturday."

"Then if Monday is fine, will you drive over to Kester's Hill with me, to call on Mrs. Powys? I will send her back to you on Tuesday, Mrs. Charteris, if you will let me have her for that one night."

No objection was made, and it was settled that Ruth was to go over to Throstlethwaite early on Monday morning.

END OF VOL. II.





